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Plush Velvet, Prince of Spotters;



OR, BOUNCING Bowery Lawyer Sharks.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES.

CHAPTER I.

TAVISH AND HIS SECRET.

GOTHAM was once more putting on her Spring attire.

Everywhere the birds were in the budding trees and the sun was starting the grass in the parks.

The weather was warm enough for loungers and they had already made their appearance on the Battery and elsewhere.

On one of the benches in Battery Park sat a man who had already secured a reputation in a queer way.

He had been seen there before, in fact he had occupied the same seat day after day all alone with his eyes cast upon the ground and a pointed stick in his hand.



PLUSH VELVET COVERED THE MAN STANDING BESIDE THE BROKER
WITH A SIX-SHOOTER.

Those who watched him saw him make some lines and figures on the ground and as often obliterate them with his boot.

He was a man past forty, but between that number and forty-five.

His face was smooth and sharp and he had a pair of deep-set eyes which would have attracted attention anywhere.

His clothes were good but worn, as one could see where the sunlight struck them, for they were slick but not greasy.

There was much of the gentleman about the Battery lounger, but at the same time there was something of the designer, the man with a dark purpose.

No one had seen what he wrote on the ground with the sharp stick, for he invariably erased it before quitting the spot, and then he would look back to make sure that it had been blotted out.

On the particular morning of which we speak he was in his accustomed place.

With the stick he had traced a lot of marks on the ground and seemed to be studying them with the closest attention, as if the re-creation did him good.

All at once he thrust forward one foot and erased what he had traced on the ground.

His coat had been buttoned to the chin and he felt his right breast as if to make sure that something in the inside pocket was still there.

"It's about time," said he aloud as he rose.

"I guess I'll go and get rid of it."

He watched a moment to see if he was observed, and then, thinking that he was not, he flitted to the Elevated cars and entered one.

He rode to the Bowery.

As he alighted he looked around again with the same fox-like scrutiny, dodged through the crowd like a spirit and reached the sidewalk.

"It's not far from the corner. I guess I can find it," he muttered. "Ah, here it is!"

He had halted in front of a rather ramshackle building for that part of the Bowery and then dodged into a hallway.

On the third floor to the right he came to a door upon which hung a tin sign bearing the legend:

"KATCH & PINCH,

"The People's Attorneys."

The Battery Statue went up to this door and knocked.

"Come in," said a voice on the inside and the next moment he opened the door and stepped forward.

A cramped room confronted him, a little office such as one sees in almost any great city.

There was not much furniture in the place, but there was enough.

At one side of the room stood a large safe which looked strong enough to defy any burglar; but it was of an old pattern and was not likely to long resist the accomplished safe breaker.

This was the home of Katch and Pinch, the lawyers.

Custer Katch and Sloper Pinch had a reputation beyond the place where they did business.

If they were the "Peoples' Attorneys," as they called themselves on their sign, there were a great many people who did not know it.

They had met and welded their fortunes; they seemed suited to each other, and what one did not think of in legal villainy was sure to occur to the other.

Katch and Pinch made money; they were not particular how they made it so it found its way to the safe in the corner, and it is safe to say that a good deal of the needful found its way there.

Katch was the senior member of this remarkable firm.

He was fifty if a day, had sharp, keen features, brown eyes and a receding forehead.

Pinch was ten years younger than his partner, but he was just as big a rascal.

Whenever he cogitated he smoked villainous cigars purchased at an Italian cigar store on the Bowery, and he got as many for his quarter as he could.

When the Battery Statue came into this office of legal cormorants he stood face to face with the celebrated firm.

Custer Katch was the first to see him and a slight cough announced to Pinch the man's arrival.

Sloper Pinch blew away a lot of smoke and looked at the man.

"I am glad to see you," said Pinch, his parchment-like face becoming suddenly wreathed in smiles. "You found us without much trouble, I hope?"

"I found you, and I hope without being seen," was the reply, as the client dropped into a chair at one side of the table and looked across it at the lawyers.

"We trust so, too. We want our clients to have things their own way, and, if we can, we see that they do."

All this time the two men were eying the stranger with the eyes of serpents.

They seemed to regard him as a new victim from whom they expected to get a good deal.

"Is your safe a good, strong one?" asked the man from the Battery, casting a sly glance at the huge, iron affair in the corner.

"We wouldn't have it, if it wasn't."

"Of course. It has never been robbed, eh?"

"Never," said Pinch, emphatically. "We have never been troubled by burglars."

"That is good. I don't like to intrust anything of mine to safes that have been visited, you know."

"We don't blame you. Shall I show you the safe, itself?"

Sloper Pinch made a move as if about to open the safe for the man's inspection, but that individual interfered.

"It's not necessary," said he. "It looks all right, and, then, you will take good care, besides."

"We always do that, and no one can put a finger upon a spot where one of our many clients have suffered by intrusting their affairs to us."

"Is the door locked?"

"You locked it by an ingenious arrangement when you came in."

"That's all right. I am glad to see that you have taken all these precautions for secrecy."

The speaker took a long breath.

He seemed to have satisfied himself that everything was right.

He leaned across the table and unbuttoned his coat.

One hand disappeared into his bosom and he began to pull something out.

The two lawyers watched these proceedings with wide open eyes and suppressed breaths.

Presently there appeared in the hand of the Unknown a long black pocketbook which was wrapped with cord which, in turn, was sealed with red wax on one side.

This he still held in his hand as he laid it on the table.

"This is the treasure which I want deposited in a safe place till I need it," he went on. "You see I don't like to patronize these deposit companies where one has to go through with a lot of red tape business every time he wants to look at his property there. You seem to be common people and those are the kind I like."

"As I have said, this is what I want to leave with you. It is very valuable, to me, at least. I hold in my hand something which, if properly used, would make me a rich man. I could roll in wealth by selling the contents of this pocketbook in a certain quarter, or, if it was known by certain parties that I had it, my life wouldn't be worth a fly's."

"It doesn't look like such a valuable thing does it?" and he held the pocketbook up before the lawyers' eyes. "It looks very common but for the wax with which it is sealed."

"Ha, ha, they don't know that I have written out the secret nor that I have accompanied it with papers which would blast more than one life and play mischief generally. I hold in my hand the most terrible weapon ever wielded by mortal man. I could destroy it and a certain man would sleep better than he sleeps now; I could break that seal and he would be the most miserable wretch in all this city. But I will do neither now at least."

"You will take charge of this pocketbook for me. You will keep it till called for by me or until death removes a certain man. You will know when that happens, if happen it does. I am master of the situation, ha, ha, ha!"

The man from the Bowery lay back in the chair and laughed.

While he laughed his eyes seemed to get an unnatural light, but his face did not appear to change much.

Afterward Katch and Pinch agreed that that was the strangest laugh they had ever heard.

"Take it and keep it sacred as you value life itself," concluded the strange client, as he pushed the sealed pocketbook across the table. "I will pay you for your trouble. How much?"

"Oh, never mind that now," said Custer Katch, with a wave of the hand toward his partner. "We are satisfied that you are all right, but you will please give us your name so—"

The client started.

"Must I do that?" he cried.

"It would suggest itself as a matter of business, you see. It would seem right in view of the arrangements we have made and—"

"That's all right. Then you may call my name Tavish."

Sloper Pinch made a note on a blotter within reach.

"Tavish," he said aloud.

"Miles Tavish," continued the stranger.

"But, of course, my name has been intrusted you in secret—"

"Certainly. We keep secrets here, we do," smiled Pinch. "Never a one has crept beyond the door of this office. Yours is as safe here as our own."

"That's right—as safe as your own, eh? That means a good deal, gentlemen."

By this time the pocketbook had passed into Pinch's hands. It was not heavy, but it seemed valuable.

The stranger gave it a long, farewell look and watched the lawyer as he bore it away toward the safe.

The great iron door was opened and the treasure was placed in an inner compartment which also was protected by a door scarcely less thick than the outer one.

"Safe at last!" said Miles Tavish. "I shall sleep better to-night, than I have slept for a month. It is off my mind, at any rate, and now I can take care of my person. I have outwitted that man and his hired spy. I am safe at last!"

He buttoned his coat as he arose, and looked again at the two legal sharks.

"You shall be well paid for guarding that treasure," he said. "I will be a millionaire soon, that I will, for I am armed as never was enemy armed in this wide world."

"But you have forgotten something," said Custer Katch. "In case we should desire to communicate with you—"

"Never mind that. I will keep that secret to myself. I will see to it that I don't give everything away. No, gentlemen, you need not know where Miles Tavish hides."

With this he stepped abruptly to the door and vanished without so much as saying good morning to the astonished lawyers.

The two fleecers heard him go down stairs.

"Shall I shadow him?" asked Katch, picking up his hat.

"No, let him go. We have reaped the harvest of our sowing: now let us look at it."

Sloper Pinch opened the safe and came back to the table with the treasure in his hands.

"I can't wait a minute. I want to see what we have here," he exclaimed, and with the last word he cut the cord which bound the black pocketbook.

CHAPTER II.

THE CRIMSON HAND.

If a young woman, known to many as Miss Collie Cormorant, had been asked for her city address, she would have given it as No. — Grand street.

In the Directory she was put down as be-

ing a dressmaker, but she made queer kinds of dresses.

None of her wearers ever came in person to her establishment to be fitted, and they never growled if the colors did not match as they should have done in the interests of harmony.

In short, Miss Cormorant was a dolls' dressmaker, and she worked for several firms in the upper part of the city.

She lived on the third floor of No. — Grand street, in a little room which was her boudoir as well as workshop, and here she was to be found when she was not delivering her work, or taking a little needed recreation in the nearest square.

She was not the only person in the house she occupied.

There were many lodgers, some of whom she barely saw, and they were coming and going so much that it would have taken a detective to keep track of them.

Miss Collie Cormorant was an orphan, or she supposed that such was the case.

She could not remember when she did not shift for herself, though at one time she had lived with a woman who got rid of her as soon as she could thread a needle.

Across the hall from the door which opened into the workshop of the maker of little robes, lived a man with whom Miss Cormorant was on terms almost familiar.

This person was a man who seemed to have queer notions about some things, and now and then he would come to Miss Cormorant's room and chat with her while she cut and made dolls' garments.

He did not tell her very much about himself.

He said once or twice that he once had a little girl who had been taken from him—the dressmaker thought by death—and that he could be a good deal richer than he was if he cared to be.

Every now and then Miss Collie would catch a glimpse of him on the street, and one warm day when she went down to the Battery, she was surprised to see her fellow lodger sitting on one of the benches drawing something on the ground with his cane.

At first she thought of disturbing him, but she did not, and after watching him a little while from a neighboring bench, she saw him obliterate what he had written and go away.

Filled with curiosity, the young girl went over to where the man had been and tried to see what he had traced in the sand.

She caught sight of broken lines, and here and there a figure, but nothing more.

The boot had baffled her.

By degrees, as he grew more and more talkative, the man told her that his name was Tavish, and that he had been living within sight of a fortune which he could grasp at any time were he so minded.

This much of himself came out the night that followed the scenes of our first chapter.

The little dressmaker was at work when her door opened slowly and she looked up to see Miles Tavish standing on the threshold with a smile on his beardless face.

He seemed in better humor than usual.

"I feel a good deal younger than I did this morning," said the strange man as he came in and took his usual chair. "I have a troublesome thing off my mind, and when one does that, you know, Miss Collie, he is apt to feel a little light-hearted."

Collie looked up and said:

"A secret, Mr. Tavish?"

"That's it exactly. I am not competent to keep such things in this house, and so I intrusted it to others."

"I hope they'll take as good care of it as you would."

"Oh, they'll do that. It's under lock and key and behind an iron door as thick as the wooden one yonder. I will let it lie there till I'm ready to strike, then—then I'll be rich!"

His eyes seemed to flash and he leaned forward till his face almost touched the little dressmaker's.

He talked with her almost an hour and in a somewhat rambling way, and now and then Collie Cormorant got a glimpse of hidden chapters in a life of which she knew so little.

He bade her good-night, cheerfully prom-

ising to call in the morning and look at the new dress she was working.

"You must come early for I take it home at seven," said the girl.

"I'll drop in early enough for you," were his last words and the door shut and the doll's dressmaker was alone.

Once in the night the girl thought she heard a noise across the hall.

It was not repeated while she listened and she fell into another doze which was succeeded by a sound sleep that lasted till daybreak.

Miss Cormorant had some extra sewing to do, and so she arose earlier than usual and prepared to do it.

Six o'clock came and she was still at work.

More than once she glanced toward the door which she had unlocked, expecting to see Miles Tavish open it; but he did not come.

Perhaps the old man had overslept himself.

At half-past six she had finished her work and began to wrap it up.

"I would like to have him see the new dress," said she aloud, stopping in her work. "It would please him, I know, for he made some suggestions about it last night."

She went into the hall and knocked lightly at Miles Tavish's door.

There was no answer, and wondering why the old man did not reply to her raps she turned the knob.

To her surprise the door opened.

Miss Cormorant put her head into the room to utter a loud cry and to stand at the door like one suddenly turned into stone.

The room was littered with a good many things.

The drawers of the bureau were opened and had been ransacked.

The carpet had been pulled up in places, and the pictures even hung awry.

But this was not all the little dressmaker saw, and if it had been she would not have lost every vestige of color as she did.

Under the table lay the body of a man.

There was a startling look about it that seemed to still the beating of her timid heart.

She went forward when she had summoned all her courage to her aid and looked again.

It was the body of Miles Tavish.

There was a dark red mark across the face and where the head lay was to be seen a little pool of blood, nearly dry.

It was light enough for the girl to take in all these terrible details and she noted all with shudders.

Even to Collie Cormorant, who had never seen anything of this sort, murder was suggested.

When she recalled the noise which had wakened her in the night she wondered why she had not heard more of it.

There must have been a good deal of noise made by the assassin in tearing up the carpet and opening the drawers in search of something which may have tempted him to the place, and, as she was not a hard sleeper, it was strange to the dressmaker that she had not heard him.

She felt that she was the discoverer of the crime.

Of course the proper thing would be to tell the police and let the sensation out.

This she did, telling first a little woman who lived on the lower floor, and then going to the patrolman on the beat that took in the house.

In order to lose no time, Collie Cormorant carried out with her the work which she was to deliver at a certain hour.

"There is one man who might be useful in avenging this crime," thought the dressmaker to herself. "I remember that the night he rescued me from the hoodlums in front of the theater, he told me that if ever I needed his assistance again I would find him on the Bowery at a certain number, and he told me, too, that he was a detective."

In just forty minutes after recalling these facts, Miss Cormorant was talking with a young man who looked almost dandified as he sat before her in a neatly furnished room.

She had found her rescuer, and he was Porter Prince, the detective, but more familiarly called "Plush Velvet, the Prince of Spotters."

Miss Cormorant in detailing her adventure of the morning in Miles Tavish's room inci-

dently told about seeing him in Battery Park drawing lines in the sand.

"By this time they have removed the body," said Plush Velvet. "I know how they do things in this city. But if you are going back, I will go along and take a look at the premises."

Miss Cormorant was going back.

On their way to Grand street she told him how Miles Tavish had said that he had got a great load off his mind; how his secret had been intrusted to the care of an iron safe; and that if he let it out it would enrich him, while, on the other hand, there were those who would not hesitate to take his life in order to get at this same secret.

Plush Velvet found the scene of the crime still filled with a goodly sprinkling of the denizens of the neighborhood.

The corpse had been removed and the door of Miles Tavish's room locked.

"I think my key will open it," whispered Miss Cormorant at his elbow.

Sure enough it did and the detective stepped into the room of death.

"I will leave you here, if you please," said the girl, turning to seek her own little quarters. "I do hope you will find a clue to what must have taken place here while I listened across the hall."

As Collie vanished with the eyes of the handsome man-hunter following her, he turned to the work before him.

Perhaps those who had removed the body had discovered and carried off the clue.

Perhaps the same hand had already robbed him of any laurels there were to be obtained, and, then, he did not know but what Miles Tavish was not worth avenging.

His performance in the Park would lead one to believe that he was mentally unbalanced, and the story about the important secret might not be true.

It was plain to Plush Velvet, the ferret, that the murdered man's room had been ransacked; everything told this, but whether the murderer found anything was quite another question.

An hour had almost elapsed when he suddenly presented himself to the little dressmaker.

"Did Miles Tavish tell you to whose safe he had trusted the great secret?"

"He did not."

"Nor even give you a hint?"

"No."

"You have told no one besides myself about this conversation?"

"I have not."

Plush Velvet came closer to the girl and said as he lowered his voice a little:

"Let this be our secret for the present at least, miss. I think you are shrewd enough to keep from letting them worm it out of you."

"I can try," was the reply, accompanied by a smile.

"And between now and the time I see you again keep a watch on the room across the hall-way. I don't want you to sit up nights watching it; but if you see any one come to it make a note of how that person looks."

"You can depend on me."

Plush Velvet took his departure, saying "good-morning" to Collie Cormorant; but he was still in the hall when that little personage almost dropped her work.

"I forgot to ask him if he found a clue!" she exclaimed, and while she listened to him on the stair, she finished: "He is a detective and, like all his class, he keeps his own secrets. He would not have told me, anyhow."

CHAPTER III.

A FEMALE CYCLONE.

SLOPER PINCH of the firm of Katch & Pinch was seated alone in the little office in the Bowery with a newspaper in his hand.

For a moment he had laid aside his cigar, for he was not cogitating at present and the smoke curling up was blue and lazy.

It was rather late in the afternoon and the long shadows were falling in the street without.

What had become of the black pocket-book belonging to Miles Tavish, if anything, was one of Mr. Pinch's secrets and he was not the man to tell it.

He was engaged in looking over the news-

paper when he heard footsteps in the hall, and, ready at all times to greet a client who might be fleeced, he lowered the sheet, and fell to watching the door.

At first he feared that the office was to be slighted, but at last the door opened and a woman came in.

Her face was concealed by a dark veil which hung quite low and which deepened the mystery concerning her looks.

Mr. Pinch laid aside the paper and waited.

"Is Mr. Katch in?" asked the caller, as a gloved hand raised the veil, displaying a face not very pretty, but quite strong and very masculine.

"Mr. Katch is out on business connected with the firm," was the reply. "I am Mr. Pinch."

The dark, deep eyes of the visitor looked at the lawyer and she came forward till she stood at the table littered with numerous documents.

"Well, if you are Mr. Pinch, perhaps you will do," she said. "I am in search of certain information which I need very much just now. I understand that your partner came from the South."

"That is true, madame; Mr. Katch is a native of Georgia."

"And yourself?"

"Oh, I am a native of no State."

"But you are an American?"

"True; but I was born on the high seas."

A smile for a moment played with the woman's lips.

"Is that why you have turned pirate?" she asked.

The lawyer started.

"I don't comprehend," he said, looking at the woman who as yet had not given him the slightest clue to her identity. "You don't mean to say, madame—"

"They call you and your partner pirates in certain circles, don't they?"

"Where they are jealous of our prosperity, yes. Pirates. We get so much to do and are so successful in practice that the others dub us pirates in law."

"It is not a very complimentary term, but perhaps it suits you as well as any. But I will come to business."

She lifted a little porte-monnaie which the lawyer, sharp-eyed as he was, had not seen till then, and buried one hand in it.

"Perhaps you can tell me where I will find a certain man—a man in whom I happen to be interested just now. He came to this section of the country some twenty years ago and since then he has been as dead as if he slept in Greenwood."

Sloper Pinch said nothing.

"This person," continued the woman who had dropped into an easy-chair, "may be in this city, and a man of your calling would be likely to know something about him. It is not unlikely that he has been living under another name, for certain events would naturally tend to make him drop the one he bore then."

"Men do that, you know, madame."

"Yes, through fear and otherwise; but this man—the person whom I seek—had the very strongest motives for dropping the name his parents gave him and hiding under an alias."

"Crime?"

"Crime," answered the woman. "Crime robs one of his name in more ways than one. But let me show you a picture of this man as he looked twenty years ago."

An old-fashioned picture came from the little bag and the gloved hand pushed it across the table.

Sloper Pinch took it up and bent forward.

It was the picture of a smooth-faced man with ample locks and a long, strong face.

The lawyer looked at it a full minute before he turned again to the silent woman in the chair.

Once or twice his lips met as if he was excited and he appeared anxious to conceal something.

He handed the picture back at last.

"Do you know him?" she asked.

"We don't appear to number him among our clients."

"I suppose not, or at least not as he appears in the picture."

What did she mean?

"Of course he does not look that way now.

Years and habits have altered his looks, and to-day, if he is living, he must be quite changed."

"What did he call himself then?"

"Anton Amos."

"And to-day—what?"

"That is just what I want to find out," was the quick reply. "I have been sent to you—sent by a person who told me that you might know something about this man."

"I'm sorry, madam; but I don't see how I can be of service to you in this matter."

"When will Mr. Katch be in?"

"Not till to-morrow."

"Is he out of the city?"

"He is. He went over to Philadelphia in the interest of the firm."

For a moment she sat bolt upright in the chair with her eyes looking straight at Sloper Pinch and he seemed to recoil in spite of his nerve.

Just then footsteps came down the hall.

Katch was outside and no one knew it better than Sloper Pinch.

"Excuse me a moment," said he, springing up and breaking for the door; but the hand of the woman caught his sleeve and he was suddenly forced back.

"Don't get excited, Mr. Pinch," she said with a smile. "I am going to wait here till your partner comes back."

In another second the door opened wide and there stood Custer Katch, looking with all eyes at the astonishing tableau displayed to his gaze.

Sloper Pinch had been caught in a falsehood, but that was nothing to the shark of the law.

In an instant the woman turned and looked at Katch.

"Back sooner than you thought, aren't you?" she said, cuttingly. "Come in, Mr. Custer Katch, and, if you please, stand over there where the sunlight falls."

With very little color in his face, the lawyer obeyed.

"You are the man," continued the woman.

"You are the very man I want to question."

Custer Katch with a spirit of braggadocio turned to his partner and demanded:

"Who is this woman, Sloper, and why do you let her have her own way in our office?"

"Mr. Pinch couldn't help it, sir," was the sudden response by the strange creature herself. "You will answer me truthfully, Custer Katch, for I see that you seem to know me."

"Of course I know you and I want to say at the beginning that you have come to the wrong place for the kind of information you seek; the wrong place, woman."

Nothing daunted by these words, the lawyer's visitor turned the photograph face up permost on the table.

"What has become of that man?" she asked, riveting her gaze upon the silent shark.

"How should I know?" replied Katch, as his eyes covered the picture for a second.

"You simply lie. You know you lie!"

Katch got a little color and then turned pale again.

"What became of him?"

No answer.

"When I quit this office I will go to another place which men of your stamp fear," she said. "I am here to get the truth, or the law, which you two rascals profess to serve, will take charge of this matter. You have lied to me, but not for the first time. You wrote me a letter twelve years ago, a letter which you backed up with a sworn statement that you had stood at the grave of the man I want to find. All that was a cunning lie to silence me and you know it, Custer Katch. It was a part of a plot to cover up another crime. Will you tell me the truth now?"

Katch looked at his partner in a mute appeal for help, but Sloper Pinch was in no condition to render it.

"You don't care to tell me?" said she. "Very well. I know where to go next."

"For God's sake get rid of this creature somehow," cried Pinch. "If you have any information which will benefit her let it out and let her go."

Although Pinch spoke thus, his looks advised his partner exactly opposite:

"Don't give her any information if by withholding it we reap any benefits," said Mr. Pinch's eyes.

Custer Katch understood the silent advice. "The man is not in the city," he said to the woman.

"I suppose you will swear to that also?"

"Certainly and with truth, too."

"Where is he?"

"In the potter's field by this time, I suppose."

"Come, you can't deceive me the second time, Custer Katch. You did that once and for years I believed the lie which you swore to. I was thrown from the trail by that statement which you sent me for I did not know you then. Dead, is he?"

"Dead!"

"If you could prove this—"

"Oh, that's easy," interrupted the lawyer shark. "The police will back me up."

"How?"

"With statements of identification which would leave no doubt in your mind."

"When did he die?"

"Three nights since."

These words seemed to stagger the woman who heard them.

"He was killed," continued Custer Katch.

"Murdered, and by the hand he once warmed back to life?"

"I don't know. I only know that he was killed. There were abundant proofs of that."

"Then, what became of his property?"

"I didn't know he had much."

She was looking the lawyer squarely in the eye.

"Did he leave no papers behind—no confession?"

"None that I know of."

"What are they doing about the murder?"

"I suppose the police are looking into it as they do with all such cases of crime."

"With detectives on the trail?"

"Doubtless."

"I will find out," she cried. "I will test your words before the sun goes down and if you are lying again—if you have deceived me once more for a base purpose—you will wish, Custer Katch, that you had not been rescued from the mad-dog in Talledaga."

With this the gloved hand snatched up the photograph and the woman turned to the door and vanished.

"In heaven's name," cried Sloper Pinch as he whirled upon his partner, "what do you call that female cyclone?"

"That is, or was, Mrs. Tavish. I hadn't seen her for thirteen years, but I knew her the minute I set eyes on her. Now, if she discovers that we have the dead man's papers our game will fail; she will undo our work from the start and we will not get a dollar of the old gold-bag's money."

Then a silence fell over the pair and in the midst of it they heard receding footsteps beyond the door.

CHAPTER IV.

COOL PROCEEDINGS.

THE mystery attending the murder of Miles Tavish in the little room on Grand street created some excitement.

From the first it became a puzzle to the police of Gotham and the best of them shook their heads over it.

But little was known of the history of the man. He had no familiars, did not share his secrets with any person, and came and went with a good deal of secrecy.

It came out before long that he had been seen in Battery Park drawing lines and figures in the sand, and he had been watched by the curious who recalled him as details of the murder came out.

The people from whom he rented the room wherein he died did not know that his name was Tavish until after the crime.

Miss Collie Cormorant, true to her promise with Porter Prince, or "Plush Velvet," the detective, kept her own secrets so far as her last interview with the dead man was concerned, and those who questioned her got but very little information for their pains.

Of course it was not known what the slayer had carried off, nor why he had taken the life of the strange man.

It looked, from the ransacking of the room, that something of value had attracted the murderer, and some said that robbery was the sole motive.

Whether it was or not, the man was dead.

enough and the assassin carried in his bosom the dread secret of crimson crime.

Miss Cormorant was right when she thought, after a moment's reflection, that Plush Velvet would not have told her about his success in searching the dead man's room if she had asked him.

The handsome ferret of the Bowery knew how to keep the secrets pertaining to his profession, and when he walked down-stairs and left the little dressmaker to herself, there was a self-satisfied smile at the corners of his mouth.

It was the fourth day after the murder and a warm breeze stole into the private office of a man well known among the money kings of New York.

Blessed with almost unlimited wealth, Marcus Nilson, just past fifty, not very gray, still good looking and a widower, was said to be one of the successful ones on change.

He handled his great wealth without assistance, looked after his rentals in person, and attended to all the details of his many-sided business with neatness and care.

He knew every night how much he was worth to the penny, and when he went to bed he could tell how much he would be able to leave to Miss Gladys if he should be called in the night.

On this particular afternoon, destined to be one of some note in his life, he was alone in the little modestly furnished office which he occupied all day.

The one clerk whom he kept had been granted a half-holiday and was out of the city, so that the rich broker was quite alone.

He was in the act of taking up the afternoon paper when the door opened and a man came in.

Marcus Nilson started slightly, as if the coming of this individual was not just to his liking; but his caller took a seat as he doffed his hat and made a remark about the freshness of the day.

Custer Katch must have come to Marcus Nilson's office on very important business, for there was a look of determination on his face and his lips showed resolution.

Evidently these men had met before.

"You are quite alone, I see," said Katch. "Midway is out."

"I gave the fellow a half-holiday," said the broker. "He wanted it, you know, and, indeed, the poor scamp seemed to need it."

"We don't get as many holidays as we need," remarked the lawyer shark. "We die for want of air and exercise. That's what I have been preaching for years, but I don't seem to get many converts."

The broker said nothing.

"You have heard, I presume, about this affair on Grand street."

In an instant the broker started visibly. He lost color and seemed to totter in his chair, but by a superhuman effort he controlled himself.

"It was a cool murder," continued the shark. "By the way, it was the work of some one who wanted the secret."

"What secret?"

"Why the one the old man carried."

"Did he have a secret—the dead man?"

Custer Katch watched the man near him with the eyes of a hawk.

He sat so near the broker that he could have laid his hand on his arm, and he seemed to gloat over the misery he had caused.

"What have they done?" asked the broker.

"The police do you mean?"

"And the detectives. Of course they are looking into the affair. That's their business, you see."

"Of course it is, and I suppose they will do all in their power to ferret out the mystery. It wouldn't be much of a mystery to some people, I guess."

The speaker elevated his head and pretended to look at the ceiling, but he was, in reality, glancing at the man near him and listening to the groan which his last remarks had wrung from Marcus Nilson's very soul.

"But really, I am not here to talk about this thing," he suddenly resumed. "I would like a little accommodation to-day. We have to meet a little payment which bothers us somewhat, and just now, owing to slow collections, we are a little embarrassed."

He had turned upon Nilson again and his

eagle eyes were riveted on his colorless face. Marcus Nilson knew the financial standing of the legal firm in the Bowery. He knew that Katch and Pinch weren't worth the paper upon which their notes were written, but he did not say so now.

"We would like to have say two thousand," said Katch. "We must meet a little matter before night and," taking out his watch, "we would like it now."

"Two thousand dollars?" echoed Marcus Nilson. "Couldn't you have secured it at your bank?"

"We did not care to bother it," with a slight cough. "We prefer to come to friends on whom we know we can depend, and, since I am here in this connection, let me say that you will never regret the slight accommodation."

Custer Katch took out one of Pinch's poor cigars, and coolly lit it. Then he crossed his long legs and began to puff smoke-rings to the ceiling with the coolness of a double-dyed villain.

The lawyer shark of the Bowery was playing another role, but one not at all foreign to his nature. He was now simply a black-mailer, and Marcus Nilson must have thought so while he looked at him.

Two thousand dollars was not a great sum to the rich man. He was not a miser, but still it looked to him like throwing that much money in the fire.

Custer Katch said nothing more. He smoked and cast the white rings to the ceiling while watching the man in the other chair.

A minute of silence fell between the pair. It seemed that Marcus Nilson was looking for deliverance, for he cast glances toward the office door which did not open.

"We will have to have the sum I have named," said the shark at last, "and, what is more, Mr. Nilson, we will have to have it from you."

This was very plain. There was no misunderstanding these words, and the man of money turned to his persecutor and gave him a look full of utter helplessness.

"I might not have that amount with me just now, and as it is past banking-hours—"

"You have that much for us," was the interruption. "You have it over yonder," and Custer Katch waved his hand toward the little safe which modestly filled one corner of the office.

Marcus Nilson drew his chair up to the open desk.

He looked through it a moment and then went over to the safe. Not a movement of his escaped the human tiger on the watch.

The shark of the Bowery saw him open the safe and take out a long pocketbook which he unclasped, taking from it some bills.

Without more ado, he counted out two thousand dollars which he placed in the lawyer's hands, to turn away and restore the pocketbook to the safe again.

"If you will give me a blank note—"

"It isn't necessary," said the broker. "I don't care to be burdened with your paper."

The lawyer colored.

"Maybe you don't care to say that you think it isn't good."

"I don't want it. I wouldn't have it on my table for any consideration."

The two men looked at one another for a moment as if they were antagonists and Custer Katch rose.

He had placed the money in his pocket in a careless manner and was half-way to the door when he looked back at the broker in his arm chair.

"It's all right," said he. "The secret will be kept so long as you treat us with kindness, but remember that we have the sting of a viper. Good-day, Mr. Nilson. Your accommodation will not be forgotten, and if we should want more, why, you will be as kind as to-day."

The door closed on the man and he betook his loathsome presence from the magnate's office.

Custer Katch went grinning into the street where the afternoon sunlight fell upon the face of as great a rascal as it ever touched in Gotham.

As for the man he had left behind, with his nails buried in his palms and his face as white and deathly as could be, he occupied the chair staring at the door as if

he had seen his happiness depart with the black-mailer of the Bowery.

"A thousand curses on that scoundrel's head!" he cried. "I should have refused him the 'loan' as he called it, and I certainly am as stout and active as he is. But it came like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, and to think that by my own weakness I have placed myself in the meshes of two as accomplished villains as live in the land! Black-mailed for two thousand dollars. It will be more than that next time. It will be five thousand, and if I don't stop it now I will continue to be bled until I am as poor as a beggar of the street. Shall I continue to submit? Shall I let those hounds dog me till I die? What do they know? What have they against me that I pay one of them two thousand dollars without a word?"

He got up walked the floor, trembling with rage.

"What do they know? Were they out the other night? Did they see me on the street? Were they lying for me to trap me and to gain possession of a secret which I guard from the world just at this particular time? Did they see me on Grand street, and do they think that my hands are red? The infamous fiends! They dare not tell me that they saw me there; they will hold over my head this unknown secret, this unseen club, and if I submit I will be dogged to my grave, and Gladys will lose the bloom of life and the happiness she now enjoys."

He came back to his chair and dropped into it with a sigh.

"If I could only trust one of these man-hunters! If I could have the nerve to go to one and tell him the truth, I might circumvent these two rascals. But that would be telling too much; it would be revealing that which is to me a secret as sacred as life itself. But something must be done. I must cut the tiger's claws by some means. No one will save me. I must do that myself."

Marcus Nilson did not quit the little office till the afternoon was vanishing and then he put on his hat and went out.

He seemed to have grown ten years older since Custer Katch's departure. He tottered unsteadily for half a square, then he braced up and resumed his old walk as if nerve had come back to him.

Half an hour later he stood at a door a good many squares from his little office, and when he opened it and saw a man smoking at a little table in a stylish room he felt like drawing back. But it was too late now, the occupant of the room had seen him, and he went on.

"You are Prince Porter, the detective? They call you Plush Velvet sometimes," he said impulsively. "I am Marcus Nilson, broker. I am here to implore your assistance. I want you to help me out of the hands of a brace of rascals, and if you do you shall be rich enough to retire from your calling."

Plush Velvet looked at the man and smiled. He saw that the broker was excited, and that he was nearly ready to sink to the floor from innate fear.

CHAPTER V.

THE BROKER'S STORY.

PLUSH VELVET pitied the man in the chair.

While it was his first introduction to Marcus Nilson, he had seen him before.

On several occasions he had seen him dining in a little restaurant on Broadway and had watched him out of curiosity while he supped his own coffee.

The detective watched the broker until the latter recovered some of his mental equilibrium, and when this took place Marcus Nilson said:

"It is true, and I am ashamed almost to confess it, that I have to call on a man of your calling for protection. Not that it is a bad calling—no worse than my own, perhaps; but I never thought I would have to come to a detective for help."

Plush Velvet waited for him to proceed.

"Do you proceed on the assumption that a man is innocent till he has been proved guilty?" he asked.

"I do."

"That is not the way they do it in Paris. There they believe a man guilty till he wipes the stain from his character and

stands bloodless before the law. Well, I may or may not be guilty. I will let you sift that out."

"You don't mean that you are suspected of committing a crime?"

"The black-mailer to whom I yielded would have the world think so and that is the club he held over my head."

"And you yielded to him, eh?"

"I paid him the price he demanded."

"And that was—"

"Two thousand dollars!"

A faint smile came to the detective's lips.

"He started out well, Mr. Nilson."

"Yes; he began with a fine figure, but that will only prove the entering wedge. This man and his partner have no conscience."

"There are two of them, then?"

"Yes, two. But let me tell you all."

The broker leaned back in the chair and for a moment seemed to close his eyes.

A bit of healthy color had come back to his face, but it was still ghastly. He laid one of his thin hands on the edge of Plush Velvet's table, and the detective saw on one of the fingers the imprint of a ring, but no ring was there.

"Concerning my business affairs, I take it that the present visit has nothing to do," began Nilson. "I was born in the South and under a warm sun I spent twenty years of my life. There it was that I met the man who has been the evil genius of my life, and the woman whom I loved and lost, Gladys's mother.

"Of the man I will speak first. Our first meeting was in New Orleans when I was sowing my wild oats, and there in a fashionable gambling-den I came across Anton Amos.

"It happened that I had a chance to do him a favor; and having a good deal of money with me at the time, I favored him. With the money which I let him have he won, and from that time became, as I have mentioned, the evil genius of my life. He became criminal in his nature; he drifted to other parts of the country and now and then sent to me for more money, which I let him have.

"It was on the eve of my marriage that this man came back suddenly to the South. He had changed a good deal, and it did not take one long to see that he was merciless and without character. Unfortunately for me I fell into his hands again, and one night, half crazed with drink, I committed a crime against the law of the land. I can say here with truth that that man got me into the trouble, and that he did it for the sole purpose of gaining over me a hold which only death should break.

"Having inherited my father's estate, and with a great deal of money at my command, I catered to his wants, and with the club which he held continually over my head—the club of exposure—I dropped thousands into his insatiate coffers until the shadow of my former self and robbed of what little happiness he had left me, I came North and hoped, from certain reports, that I was rid at last of my tormentor.

"In the North I tried to forget the past and to live only for wife and child. I even changed my name. I wished I could change my soul with its memories, but that was impossible. I saw my wife fade away, leaving me the little babe who grew and blossomed like a rose until she became the splendid woman Gladys is.

"Here I made money once more. Here, toiling from daybreak till midnight, I accumulated wealth, and with the past behind me and what I considered certain proof that Anton Amos was dead, I hoped that I would be able to descend to the grave with that one dread secret of my life unopened.

"Not long ago I awoke suddenly to the discovery that the tiger still lived. One afternoon while crossing Battery Park my attention was called to a man seated on a bench and marking with a stick on the ground at his feet.

"Something in the make-up of the man made me inspect him from another bench. I saw that he had the chin of one whom I knew only too well, and when he rose and walked away, I saw that all my proofs of death amounted to nothing, and that I was

again looking at Anton Amos, the gambler of New Orleans.

"My first impulse was to follow him and have it out at once, for something told me that he had come into my little world for the purpose of completing after so many years his victory over soul and body.

"I could have killed him then and there. All the tiger that man possesses in his nature rose in my heart, and my hands itched to seize his throat and choke the life out of him before he could market the secret he carried in his bosom.

"Day after day I saw him in the Park. I would watch him from a distance and see him write in the sand only to erase it ere he went away.

"I followed him home at last. I discovered that he inhabited a small room on Grand street and thither I tracked him more than once, becoming my own bloodhound. It gave me a good deal of satisfaction to know that I knew where he lived. I had also discovered that he had, like myself, taken another name, and that he was now Miles Tavish a name of which you may have heard within the last few days."

Here Marcus Nilson paused and looked away a moment.

"I now come to the critical part of my narrative—to the one event which has furnished the black-mailer with his weapon," he resumed. "A few nights ago I left home disguised, the first time I had so arrayed myself since leaving the South. Gladys knew nothing of my intentions, and I thought that my act was seen by no one but myself and God.

"I went to Grand street. I felt that the time had come for me to act—to rid myself of this man who had come back to my life a blighting shadow.

"Miles Tavish lived in a room the location of which I had already discovered. It was easily gained. I knew that I could get into the house without exciting suspicion and that I could reach his door just as well.

"It was past midnight when I got there. The silence of the house was not broken by my footsteps, and at the door of my old enemy's room I listened with all ears for a sound of him. Not a sound came from the room beyond that door. I felt that he was asleep. There was no murder in my heart. I swear to you, Plush Velvet, or Prince Porter, that I wanted to meet Anton Amos for another purpose.

"If I had failed to bribe him I would not have killed him. I would not have stained my hands with blood—not even his—for Gladys's sake; but nevertheless I was there at the door of the worst enemy I had in the world and at the hour of midnight. You know what that would mean in the eye of the law.

"I found the door before me unlocked. As if to help me out, fate or fortune had opened it for me. I turned the knob and entered, seeing a dim light over a table and on a cot the figure of a man. What could I not have done then? There lay Anton Amos, or Miles Tavish, at my mercy. I tip-toed forward and by the aid of the light looked down into his face. He was sleeping soundly. I could have pounced upon him then and there and shut off the life which, sooner or later, would end mine.

"In falling back with my eyes still riveted upon Miles Tavish, I tripped over some carpet and fell against the table. In an instant with the spring of a lion suddenly roused he was out of bed and at me.

"We clutched underneath the light and struggled desperately over the floor. I found that time had not robbed him of strength or suppleness, and but for a lucky accident which occurred at the right moment I might have been left dead in the room of my old foe. I bore him to the floor at last and held him there till he seemed to breathe no longer.

"I did not tarify in that room after rising to my feet. I slipped to the door, opened it and went out. Back to my house I went and Gladys, dreaming in her chamber, knew nothing of her father's night visit to the den of the man who was his evil genius. You may know that Miles Tavish was found dead in that room the next morning by the dressmaker across the hall.

"You know, too, that he was bleeding when found, that the room was turned upside down, that he had been stabbed in the

throat as if his head had been bent back over a chair and the dagger plied. I had no dagger with me, not even a knife, for I found on my return to the office the next morning that I had left it there the day before.

"It is not for me to say who came after me and took Miles Tavish's life. I only know that my hand did not rob him of his blood nor still the beating of his heart. It may be for a man of your calling to solve this mystery of crime, Plush Velvet. Solve it whether I be in the net when you draw it ashore or not, and, as I have said, you need not follow the trail any longer.

"I paid Custer Katch what he wanted. I let that legal shark blackmail me, and the club which he held over my head was by inference my visit to Miles Tavish's room that fatal night. I must have been watched by some one. I was seen on the street, perhaps, followed by the same eye that looked into mine to-day while its owner coolly demanded blood-money which I paid.

"That is my story. You know all, Plush Velvet. You see what a hole I am in, for the law would say and circumstantial evidence would back it up in it, that I killed the man who died on Grand Street on the night of the twenty-second. I might have killed him—I do not know. If he had not been in the proper humor I might in the heat of passion have killed Anton Amos; but I did nothing of the kind. I left him insensible on the floor, but not dead. The other person finished the work. Who was that person? And what did he want in that room, for the house was ransacked?

"My God! to be under the hands of men of the stripe of that firm on the Bowery to be blackmailed without the courage to come out in public and resist, is as bitter as death. I cannot blight Gladys's life by letting her know that I was a criminal; that I went to the den of Miles Tavish to buy him off in order to keep my past from coming out. Save me and discover the guilty and then come to me for your reward. You shall name it yourself even if it bankrupts me, for my child must not know the truth."

As Marcus Nilson concluded, his gaze fell upon his hand, and the imprint of the ring seemed to startle him.

"You seem to have lost a ring, Mr. Nilson," said Plush Velvet.

"Yes, and I lost it that same night. The loss was discovered the next morning, and I may have lost it in the struggle on the floor with Miles Tavish."

The ferret smiled.

"Was this a part of it?" he asked, taking from his pocket something which glittered in the light.

The broker of Gotham sprung forward with a cry.

"That is half of it!" he exclaimed. "You see it was broken somehow and you have the piece which contains the set."

Plush Velvet let his eyes fall to the half-circle, while Marcus Nilson remained silent, for a moment, when he said:

"In your hands that piece of ring is safe and my secret as well; but there are others who would make the most of the find."

"You are right."

"I see, I see! The other half of the ring is enough to hang me. Merciful Heaven, I am lost!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK.

The Shadow Ferret of the Bowery saw Marcus Nilson depart from his room with some misgivings as to the final outcome of the trail of Grand street.

He had undertaken to solve the secret which Miles Tavish had died possessed of, and that was, to whom had he intrusted the one thing which had bothered him?

He had told Miss Cormorant, the little-dressmaker, the night of his death, that he had got rid of a weight of trouble, and everything went to prove that he had taken somewhere certain documents which had an important bearing on his life.

Another thing: the detective in searching the dead man's room had found more than the broken ring, since established to have been the property of Marcus Nilson.

In a drawer which the murderer seemed to have overlooked and among a lot of papers

and bits of everything, he had come across the leaves of an old diary.

Written in pencil, and with the marks of age everywhere, the torn leaves had told the detective that they held a part of a secret which had belonged to the dead man.

The entries were dated back nearly twenty years and confirmed in part the story told by the broker.

Plush Velvet took possession of the leaves and carried them off with him.

He was in his room the next afternoon after his visit from Marcus Nilson, when he was surprised to see before him Miss Collie Cormorant.

The little dressmaker came in manifesting some excitement, and with quite a story to tell.

"Some one has come to the room," said she as she dropped into the chair facing the detective. "It was this afternoon, and I was making dresses as usual."

"You saw him, then?"

"I saw her," said the girl, quickly. "The person who came to the room was a woman, and she was veiled."

"Then you did not see her face?"

"Not then," was the reply. "She came to the door, and I saw her there a moment as she seemed to be toying with the lock."

"With a key, Miss Cormorant?"

"It seemed so. Well, afterward she went off without opening the door, and I thought I would follow her. I went down after her, and got sight of her on the street.

"I traced her several squares, and she seemed eager to get away from the vicinity. By and by she vanished in a small house on another street, and from losing her I came hither."

"Do you think you followed the woman home?"

"It may be. She opened the door with a pass-key and seemed to be at home there."

"What is the number?"

Miss Cormorant took a slip of paper from her pocket and handed it to Plush Velvet.

"That place will not be hard to find," smiled the ferret as he looked up. "I am inclined to think that Miss Tavish's visitor lives where you lost her, but we will see about that. How was she dressed?"

"She was habited in black, which was unrelieved by a single bright color. Her hands were gloved, but I could see that they were small."

"And you did not so much as get a glimpse of her face?"

"Only once, and that was when a puff of wind blew her veil up as she turned a corner; then I saw that she was dark of skin, nothing more."

"Her eyes you did not see?"

"Not at all, and I wanted to see them so bad," smiled the dressmaker.

"Better luck next time," said the detective.

Half an hour later Plush Velvet was alone, and when the afternoon had vanished and the long shadows of another night had fallen once more over the vast city, a man came down the stairs leading to his room.

The street to which Collie Cormorant had tracked the strange woman was his objective point and he turned into it from the east.

In a short time he looked up at the number of a certain house and smiled.

"Not a very pretentious place for the veiled woman," said he to himself. "We will see what sort of creature Miss Cormorant saw come to Miles Tavish's door."

The hour was not late despite the lighted lamps. Here and there the long strips of light fell athwart pavement and street and the detective saw the figures which flitted across them like specters.

All at once the door of the watched house opened.

It opened so suddenly that the ferret drew back into the shadow of a post and held his breath.

When it closed a figure stood on the stoop and he saw a veiled form which recalled the story told by the dressmaker.

He had found the woman for himself.

She stood on the stoop for half a minute during which time she looked up and down the street and then started off, confident that she had not been seen.

Plush Velvet, alert as usual, started in pursuit.

He did not lose sight of his prey for an instant, but kept her in sight as she threaded the mazes of streets and crossings under the lights of New York.

She turned into the Bowery.

With the ferret almost at her heels she went straight to the stairway which led to the rooms of Katch & Pinch and suddenly dodged into the dark place.

Plush Velvet followed, confident of finding something worth his while at the end of the trail.

He heard the footsteps of the woman, now unseen in the corridor overhead, and he slipped up the steps with caution and saw her at a door.

There was no light beyond the transom.

She looked like a specter as she stood leaning against the portal revealed by the light which burned at one end of the corridor, and Plush Velvet fell to watching her in hopes that the veil would be lifted.

All at once the door opened and she vanished.

The door was shut softly, but the ferret heard it shut and he went forward.

Not a sound came from the room beyond.

It was still dark and the ferret listened, he could do no more, where he had halted.

What was the woman doing in the dark? What was her mission to the rooms of the sharks of the Bowery and why had she come thither at that unbusiness-like hour?

All at once a little light leaped up in the room.

It was not large and while it increased a little it did not seem to illuminate the whole interior.

Plush Velvet placed his hand on the knob, but though he turned it firmly, it did not open the door.

The woman seemed to have locked herself in.

Half a minute later there came from the room a half stifled cry and the detective drew back.

"The villains! they have destroyed it all," he heard a voice say. "He lied to me, as I knew at the time, and they have hatched a plot intended to feather their nest over the grave and the crimes of the dead."

No one answered these words.

The veiled woman had spoken aloud and yet he could not see where she stood nor what she had discovered.

The Bowery shadow was still at the door when he heard the bolt shoot back.

As it opened he fell away and saw the woman in the hall again.

"I will see them again. I will have the truth if it takes blood, the truth and vengeance! He was killed, they told me this when I called, and I have found that in this particular Custer Katch did not lie. Killed on Grand street and robbed of the secret he carried. What became of the papers? What have these rascals done with them?"

Plush Velvet could have touched the speaker and all she had to do to see him was to turn and look him in the face.

"They need not know that I came to their den to-night," she went on, looking daggers at the door and glaring at the tin sign that hung there. "I will tell them when I am ready. But wait! I know something about the past. Though I came too late to find him alive, though I was not soon enough to stay the dagger of the murderer, I can play the hand he held. I can show them that Mona Amos, Madame Spider as they sometimes call me, can strike and win."

Down the hall she went with Plush Velvet once more after her.

The trail was getting interesting. It was revealing some things which in time might lighten more than one dark spot connected with the Grand street puzzle and he was anxious to follow it up.

But at the head of the steps he shrunk back for some one was coming up from the street, and the woman was hugging the wall where the shadows lay thickest.

The detective looked and saw the tableau, but he saw that it was apt to be an animated one.

One hand of the woman had been thrown against the wall in an attitude of defense, and she seemed to be waiting like a tiger for the person coming slowly up the steps.

This person glided along the opposite wall and she was watching him like a tigress.

Plush Velvet could believe that her eyes were blazing like carbuncles in her head and that she was waiting with bated breath for the man below her.

They came face to face at last and the man suddenly recoiled for he had just then seen the strange creature with his face hidden and he seemed to fear that his hour had come.

To him, apparently, there was something terrible in the woman on the stairway.

"Go on," said the veiled creature. "Why do you stop there? I am no tigress."

But the man did not move.

"Why don't you show me your face?" said he. "You stand there with it covered as if you were a hunted creature afraid of your own shadow. This is not the place for a woman at this hour. They don't transact business in this building after night."

"But perhaps I do," was the reply, accompanied by a little laugh. "You don't know what I do and more than one man has an office here."

"That is true. But here, I want to see what you look like. I like mystery myself and—"

He put out his hand and caught the veil before the gloved fingers could interfere.

Quick as a stroke of lightning came the flash of a knife in the dim light which prevailed.

Plush Velvet saw the movement between him and the street and the rash fellow with a cry dropped the veil and fell down two steps.

"You're half tigress!" he exclaimed.

"You are not the only man who knows this," she laughed again. "Others are destined to find this out before they die."

"Now, will you go up?" she went on.

"Yes, anything to escape your infernal knife."

They parted on the steps and the man came on up while the veiled viper watched him a moment and went toward the pavement.

"Was there ever such a woman before her?" said the man, as he paused at the top of the steps and watched her vanish. "I didn't get the veil very high, but I knew her. Years make a change in a pretty woman. She is dark now and homely. I remember when that woman was courted of men and when, but for the one act she did, she was the worshiped belle of a whole district. Mona Amos, eh? Yes, she became the gambler's wife and now she is on the war-path. I wouldn't be her marked victim for all the gold in Wall street. But what brought that woman to this building tonight? What but vengeance and a game of some kind?"

The man looked down the stairway again and his face became clouded.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE TOILS.

Miss COLLIE CORMORANT had to submit to a good many interviews.

Her name had crept into the newspapers in connection with the mysterious death of Miles Tavish, and she found herself famous as it were in a single day.

The little dressmaker, keeping in her mind her promise to the Shadow-ferret of the Bowery, played her part so well that the shrewdest reporters considered her a young girl well balanced and a match for them.

All the while she felt that the detective was at work and she could imagine him picking up a clue here and one there, forging the chain about the neck of the guilty.

She pursued her calling in the little room on Grand street, now and then during the week that followed the strange crime having to stop and talk with some one who wanted to hear her story from her own lips.

Since she had seen the veiled woman at Miles Tavish's door no one else had been there to her knowledge. The woman herself had not come back, and Collie Cormorant thought that she had seen her for the last time.

It was the girl's custom sometimes after dark, when the nights admitted of it, to walk to the nearest park and for an hour or so enjoy the bracing breezes of night.

She deemed this exercise essential to health and took good care not to miss such an evening walk whenever she had the time.

It was the night after Plush Velvet's interview with Marcus Nilson, the broker, in which the victimized man gave the detective a hidden chapter from his life and recounted his story of his visit to Miles Tavish's room, and the little dressmaker strolled into the Park for her usual recreation.

It is true, summer had not yet come, but the air was warm for a spring night and the little Square was well filled with people.

She walked to her favorite bench which to her joy she found unoccupied and seated herself.

The girl was plainly attired—she never dressed beyond her means—and her dark garments gave her the look of one of the great army of working women of the great city.

For some time she sat watching the varying procession of people who crossed and recrossed the Park when she became aware that she was watched.

A man who had strolled past her three times had stopped near a tree and was furtively regarding her.

The moment the girl discovered this that moment she became uneasy.

To be watched by a stranger at once took her mind back to the death of Miles Tavish, and she thought of what Plush Velvet had told her about exercising discretion.

Miss Cormorant watched the stranger with feelings of dread, inasmuch as he seemed to hold her under an espionage that threatened her peace of mind.

She thought of rising and fleeing from the Park, but the next moment she concluded to remain and face him, relying on her courage—she fancied she had some—and letting him know that she was not afraid of him.

For ten minutes the man at the tree watched the girl and then sauntered back toward her.

Miss Collie eyed him closely and saw that he was a young man, handsome and very bold.

All at once, when within a few feet of her, he turned toward her and came up to the bench.

He touched his hat in a gallant manner and bowed, but at the same time, without so much as the shadow of an invitation, he seated himself at one end of the settee.

The little dressmaker drew back and looked at him with indignation mantling her brows.

"You are Miss Collie Cormorant?" said the man in a well-modulated voice.

"Which may be nothing to you," smiled the girl. "If I am Miss Cormorant, I do not know that my identity interests any one but myself."

"Ah, but it does. Usually I don't care much for pretty girls, but since you have become famous I cannot help saying a word or two to you."

His impudence was not very insulting, as he had a way of speaking which seemed to sugar-coat it.

"You are the young lady who occupied a room across the hall from that which was occupied by Miles Tavish the night he met his death?"

"I am," said Collie. "I have lived there nearly two years."

"So I understand. You gave the police a little information about the man and the events of the night of the twenty-second."

"What little I knew."

"Yes, yes. You were asleep that night—you were dreaming, I believe, when the unfortunate man died."

Miss Cormorant nodded and looked away a moment.

All this time the man was regarding her with the eyes of a hawk.

"Then, after all, you didn't have much to tell?" he went on.

"Not a great deal, for my testimony was published, or the substance of it got into the papers, to which you have, no doubt, had access."

The dolls' dressmaker could be very precise when she wanted to.

The stranger bit his lips.

"Miss Cormorant, would you mind telling me the rest of your story—that part which you have until now withheld from the police?"

Collie Cormorant gave him a look of surprise and seemed to retreat to the further end of the bench.

"The part I have withheld?" she echoed.

"Certainly," he said. "You haven't told all, and you know it."

"I—"

"Come," he came toward her, moving down the settee like a sneaking thug. "You know very well that you have kept something back, and I want to know what it is."

Miss Cormorant colored and partly rose, when he darted at her, seized her wrist and pulled her down upon the settee.

"You will tell me just what I want to know. You will tell the truth too, or it will be the worse for you."

Instead of screaming while his hand gripped her like a vise, the dolls' dressmaker looked him in the eye and her courage seemed to come back to her in ample quantity.

"I will tell you nothing," she said.

"You will tell all," was the reply. "I am here for that purpose, and I will see that the information is forthcoming. I want to know what you imparted to the Bowery Shadow."

"To whom, sir?"

"In plainer terms, to Plush Velvet, as they call the human cheetah of the Bowery."

"You might go and ask him," exclaimed the girl with irritating coolness.

"Not I—at least, not just now. You are the person I am interviewing and you will impart the information I seek."

"But what if I should refuse?"

"Oh, there is a way to bring a girl like you to terms. I will see to that."

"Try, if you dare! I am not to be brow-beaten by a man of your ilk. I am not to be frightened into a confession which might injure a friend."

"A friend, eh? So the detective has made you believe that he is a friend? That's clever, but he is a clever one."

There was no reply.

"You will not tell me the rest of your story? You will not let me know what you told him about your last interview with Miles Tavish?"

Resolution flashed up in the dressmaker's eyes.

"I will not!"

Tighter and tighter grew the grip on Miss Collie's wrist; the ungloved hand seemed to sink to the bone, but she did not wince. She only drew back and looked at him indignantly.

"Come, then," he said, with a hasty glance around. "You will come with me."

"With you?" repeated the girl.

"With me! It will not be a long trip for you and you will fare well."

He almost pulled her from the seat and dragged her across the Square.

"Not a cry, not a sign to any one!" he said at her ear. "You must know that silence is golden and essentially so in this instance."

Miss Cormorant saw the robust figure of a policeman in the light when they reached the sidewalk, but she glanced at the man at her side and did not speak.

They left the Park and he led her across the street where stood a carriage with a man lounging at the open door.

The little dressmaker drew back when they reached the vehicle; but all at once she was thrust into it and the man sprung in after her.

He gave no directions to the other man, who sprung at once to the box and took up the lines.

Miss Cormorant with a very white face sunk back into one corner of the carriage with the hand still at her wrist and tried to note the direction in which they were moving.

Her captor said nothing, but faced her, looking at her keenly as she could see whenever they passed a lamp, and now and then seemed to smile.

It was a long ride for the dolls' dressmaker, but it ended at last.

The carriage turned into a dark street and drew up in front of a two-story house.

The man alighted and helped his prisoner out.

Collie looked up and noted the condition of the place, seeing that it was an unpretentious house not unlike the many which flanked it on either side.

A door opened when they reached the step

and the next moment the girl was pushed inside.

"Is this the bird?" said a woman's voice and Collie found herself confronted by a person she had never seen before.

"This is the bird. I was forced to fetch her with me as she refused to chirp in the Park."

Miss Cormorant turned indignantly upon the man, but he had vanished and she was in the hands of the woman.

A rather good-looking creature of about forty, not very tall, but wiry, with dark eyes that shone like rubies and hand quite long but shapely—such was the jaileress to whose care the dolls' dressmaker had been intrusted.

"I am not here of my own will," said Collie.

"Of course not," replied the woman with a light laugh. "My dear, if you had talked cleverly I am sure you would not be with us at this time."

"What does it mean?"

"Oh, that will come out by and by, but come into the parlor, and if you are weary, I will prepare a lunch."

"Not here!" cried Collie, resisting in the hallway. "I am not to remain here. I am a prisoner here against my will, and you have no right to keep me in this house."

"You are wrong. We have a right to do what we please with you, and we intend to exercise that right. You refused to talk to him, and that's why you are here, and here you will remain till you tell us what Miles Tavish did with the secret he carried so long—to whom did he take the black pocket-book?"

Miss Cormorant could have fallen back, and looked at the woman with speechless astonishment.

All roads seemed to lead to the mystery of Grand street. She was to be forced to tell what she did not know, for Miles Tavish had not told her to whom he had intrusted the secret, and Plush Velvet was trying to ferret it out upon her scant testimony.

"You will tell us the truth," repeated the woman. "You will give us that point or you will never leave this house alive!"

This threat she seemed capable of carrying out to the letter. Her eyes got a dangerous light, and she leaned forward till Collie Cormorant had to push her back with her little hand.

CHAPTER VIII

BAFFLED BY BEAUTY.

"SOMERODY has been here."

"What makes you think so?"

"Can't you see that the papers have been looked over, and the cigar stump, which I left on that paper-weight, lies on the floor?"

"But the door was locked."

"Of course, but what's that to a person nowadays who wants to look into a room?"

Custer Katch made no reply, but he fell into a serious mood.

He and his partner stood in their little den on the Bowery, and Mr. Pinch had made the discovery that the place had been visited during their absence.

"What about the safe?" suddenly cried Custer, springing to the iron treasury in one corner.

"It may have been plundered, too."

An examination brought a smile of satisfaction to the lawyers' faces, for the interior of the safe had been found intact, and they saw that the plundering had not disturbed its contents.

"But who's been here? that's the question," said Katch. "Of course he was here for no good."

"Of course."

"Maybe that infernal woman came back."

The other one laughed.

"Or perhaps the detective entered the office while we were out and—"

"Well, if he did what did he find? Nothing, of course. Let that man stop before he gets too far. There are some things I will not stand, and one of these is to be shadowed by a man whose duty seems to be to give his fellow-man all the trouble he can."

"I don't like that man. I have seen him of late looking up at our windows as if in this room lay the secret he is after."

"Maybe it is here."

Both laughed together and Custer Katch threw himself into a chair and busied himself with the papers that littered the table.

He had sharp eyes, had the man who had blackmailed Marcus Nilson, the broker.

His peaked nose and parchment face were not for nothing, and his skinny hands were thin enough to have fished an oyster from its shell without injuring the shell itself.

"See here," he suddenly said, turning to Pinch.

"Well?"

"We want more money."

"We always want money."

"Yes, and we want some just now. That two thousand didn't go very far."

"I told you it wouldn't."

"Would you mind giving the screw a turn this time?"

"To-day?"

"Yes, the sooner the better."

"We mustn't kill the goose too soon."

"Oh, as to that I believe in getting all we can before that detective plays out his hand. There's no telling what he said to Marcus Nilson, for you know that the broker went to the ferret and perhaps told him about what we did."

"Do you think so?"

"Really, there's no telling what passed between the two. Porter Prince is shrewd and cool. He is the man who of all men will get to the bottom of the Grand street mystery, and if he once knew that we have the black pocketbook of the deceased why—heavens! what would we do?"

Sloper Pinch's brow darkened.

"What but strike?" he cried, leaning across the table with his hand clinched. "What but silence him? This is no child's play, Custer; no child's play, I tell you."

"Of course not, Sloper."

"So far as I am concerned I have burned my bridges behind me and I will not be cheated out of the game by a man-hunter."

"Neither will I, but—"

"Well?"

"It's dangerous and the man is dangerous, too. As to the woman who descended upon us like a thunderbolt, I don't fear her so much as I do Plush Velvet, the ferret."

"No; she is the least dangerous. If she is determined to find out what became of the black pocketbook and its contents, why, she will work in such a manner as to give herself away at all times and keep us posted, but the detective—he will work under cover all the time, and that renders him so dangerous."

The two sharks of the law sat silent a few moments when Pinch arose.

"If you say so I will try my hand today."

"Try it! Play it fine, give him to understand that we want another 'loan,' and hint, if he hesitates, that we know who went to Grand street the night of the twenty-second and so on."

"I'll do it."

"Good luck to you and report with the roll in a short time."

Custer Katch leaned back in his chair and saw his partner take his departure.

Sloper Pinch went to his little boarding-house some six squares from the den, and dressed for the proposed visit. He took more pains than usual and when all was ready went down upon the street and took a car.

The morning was not far advanced and the fresh breeze was touching the cheeks of thousands.

Marcus Nilson had come down to his office, but this time he was not alone in his private room.

Of this fact Sloper Pinch was not aware when he entered the building and turned the knob of the door marked "private."

The legal hyena fell back a pace as he saw with the broker a handsome young girl who flushed when he made his appearance.

"Come in," said Marcus Nilson. "This young lady is my daughter, Gladys."

Sloper Pinch bowed and took a chair at one side of the room.

He waited for the young girl to leave, but she did not show any signs of going, sitting near her father and looking from the window upon the busy street beyond.

"What can I do for you?" asked the broker, looking up at the lawyer.

"I wish to see you on private business," was the reply.

"Ah," and the broker looked at Gladys.

"Miss Gladys is my confidential partner and—"

"Then I will call later."

The girl spoke up at this.

"You need not fear to trust any secrets, business or otherwise, with me," she said. "I am sure that papa will not object to my hearing what you have to say."

Mr. Sloper Pinch was in a dilemma.

To proceed with the real business that had brought him to the office while the daughter was present was out of the question, and he did not like the idea of doing so.

"Never mind," said he, rising. "I can call again and the business is not so urgent that it cannot wait."

He picked up his hat and was half-way to the door when Gladys left her chair.

Pinch walked into the outer office, for the moment deserted by the broker's clerk, and there she touched the lawyer's arm.

In another moment Pinch was staring at the vision of beauty by whom he was confronted.

"You are Mr. Pinch, the lawyer?" said Gladys.

"I—really, miss—"

"You are Sloper Pinch of the firm of Katch & Pinch. You came to see my father on business which you dared not mention in my presence. I know something of you. I have heard of the manner in which you and your partner conduct business, and I must say that it is not very complimentary to you."

These words almost took Pinch's breath. He was certain he turned white, for it seemed to him that he could feel the pallor stealing across his face.

"I wish to say," continued Gladys, speaking in the same determined tones, "I will say that you need not come to see papa any more. I disapprove of your coming."

The man snarled.

"You do, eh?" he said. "You don't want me to transact business with him—business which is to his interest?"

"A man of your ilk can't benefit my father in any way. Remember that I don't want you to come here any more."

This was almost too much for Sloper Pinch.

He felt the hot blood mounting to his temples and as it warmed him as with a breath of fire, he exclaimed:

"The time may come when your father, and yourself, for that matter, will be glad to humble themselves before Katch & Pinch."

It was a bad break, but he could not help it. He had not stopped to think; the words had fallen from his lips without forethought, and almost before the last one had been spoken he regretted the occurrence.

"You resorts to threats, do you?" cried Gladys. "You have armed yourself with the dagger of the villain. I see. Well, Mr. Pinch, let me say that if you continue to force your presence into this office you will be met with force."

"From you, miss?"

"Never mind from whom, but I shall interfere when I feel interference necessary. You and your partner shall not blackmail Marcus Nilson successfully."

Sloper Pinch recoiled from before the eyes of the fair girl.

"You will go back and acquaint your brother shark of the state of affairs here. You had best seek other fields, for while I live you shall not ply your nefarious calling in this building."

The lawyer shark went away, but with the last words of Gladys Nilson ringing in his ears and her flushed face graved on the tablets of memory.

"Curse the girl!" he grated as he gained the street. "Who would have thought that she had that much nerve? Why, her eyes flashed like sparks from a tint, and I was almost afraid to glance down at her hands for fear they gripped a cowhide."

Custer Katch was alone in the office on the Bowery when the beaten schemer returned. As Pinch opened the door he was greeted with a shout and Custer Katch held out his hand.

"How much did the gold-mine yield this time?" he asked.

Sloper Pinch dropped sulkily into his chair and bit off the end of one of his bad cigars.

"Not a dollar!" said he.

"Then you did not find him in?"

"I found him in the office, but he was not alone."

"And you left without stating your business, eh?"

"His daughter was there—Miss Gladys I think he calls her; and I transacted my business with her."

"With the girl? Heavens! man, where was your head?"

"Where it is now; but I did not state the business to the girl. She warned me not to have any further communication with her father and she included the firm in the prohibition."

"What, did the girl do all this?"

"She called us a brace of blackmailers and threatened to call in help if we did not stop negotiations with her father."

Custer Katch's cigar nearly dropped from his hand.

"Well, well; this is a fine kettle of fish," said he. "The idea of the firm of Katch & Pinch being beaten by a girl! It is too ridiculous to think of. Why, the weak creature—"

"That's right where you're wrong," broke in Pinch. "She has the nerve of a man and the coolness of I don't know what. When you call Miss Nilson a weakling you are a thousand miles from the truth."

Then Pinch told the story of his visit in detail, to all of which his partner listened without interrupting him.

"Well, she must be humbled!" hissed Custer Katch. "This girl shall not stand between us and the golden store. We have all the strings in our hands; we have the papers which Miles Tavish brought here and we shall succeed. But this girl. I want to humble her. Blackmailers, eh? By heavens! she shall have a blackmailer for a husband!" and the fist of Custer Katch fell upon the table with an emphasis which could have been heard in the hall.

CHAPTER IX.

FLEECING THE FLEECERS.

SLOPER PINCH was inclined to laugh at his partner's threat.

What! Gladys Nilson marry a blackmailer? The very idea was preposterous.

"You don't mean that, Ketch?" said he.

"Don't I? Wait and see."

"But who is to be the lucky man?"

Custer Katch blew a lot of smoke toward the ceiling and a smile wreathed for a moment his sallow lips.

Pinch, who almost worshiped his partner's acumen, waited for him to speak.

"I am that man," said Katch, at last. "I am the man referred to just now."

"You become Miss Nilson's husband?"

"That's what I mean."

"I don't see how that event can ever occur."

"But you will admit that if it does occur we will be in clover, eh?"

"Of course, but the old gentleman will never consent—"

"We shall see. You know what we can prove; you know who went down into Grand street on the night of the twenty-second; you know that a certain man watched Miles Tavish in Battery Park; that the same man followed him home, and at last made bold to enter the house where he lodged."

"I know all that."

"Well, isn't that enough for us to know, and with the papers, the ones which Miles Tavish brought to us for safe-keeping and just in time, too, for he died that same night, you remember, what better hold do we want on the old gold-bug, and what more can I have when I set out to wed the beautiful Gladys?"

"But the girl herself may have a say in the matter."

"Let her! She spunked up to you, but to me, ah, that's another thing, Pinch. She won't say as much to Custer Katch, not to me, old boy."

Sloper Pinch was thus convinced that his partner stood in a very fair way to become the husband of the fair girl who had driven him from his prey and he said no more.

Katch unlocked the safe and took out the black pocketbook.

"This is our secret," said he. "The de-

tective even does not know that we hold this winning card and no memoranda was found in the dead man's room as to where he had left the treasure. Everything has worked admirably to our advantage, and we are the ones who will reap the golden harvest."

The speaker took some papers from the pocketbook and spread them on the table.

"The past life of this gold-bug," he went on. "Here are the chapters which Marcus Nilson would not have opened for the world. This is the terrible weapon with which Miles Tavish, alias Anton Amos, armed himself and which he undoubtedly intended to use at the proper moment. He knew how well he was armed but he was afraid of being plundered. He knew that Marcus Nilson had watched him in the Park and he felt that the broker would play a deep and dark hand against him in order to deprive him of the club. But he did not. The victim fell into our net and he died that same night. Strange wasn't it?"

Sloper Pinch said nothing.

One by one the papers were gone over and Katch was about to replace them in the black pocketbook when steps were heard in the hall.

He sprung up and thrust the pocketbook into his bosom.

At that same moment the door opened and a man came in.

He looked like a person of fifty past, with a slight stoop in one shoulder and a dull eye.

"Am I in the right place—the office of Katch and Pinch?" he asked, looking around.

"We are the firm," said Pinch.

"My name is Dogan—Saul Dogan and I live over in Jersey."

"Another pigeon," said Katch to himself, as if all the "pigeons" came from the Jersey side.

Mr. Dogan came forward and took a chair in an awkward manner, while he looked across the table at the two sharks.

"I am interested in a bit of business which I think may need some legal work," he went on. "About ten years ago my uncle died rather suddenly and a will which he left behind turned out just the opposite from what some of us expected.

"I never got a cent, gentlemen, and that when the old gentleman had been heard to say that Saul—that's me—should never come to want. Not that I am near there yet, for I've made a stake in the West; but I want my own, that's all. I am able to give two good lawyers of your acumen a fine retainer and if you want it now, why, it is here."

The unexpected client drew a pocketbook from his pocket and began to open it. There was a goodly display of bills and the eyes of the sharks flashed.

"You see," he went on, "my uncle had a brother who went South a long time ago and died there. He changed his name from some cause or other and assumed that of Amos—Anton Amos, I think it was."

The lawyers started.

"He died there, I say, but he got rich, so rich that he hardly knew what to do with his money. I have papers on my person which will prove up his wealth; but, you see, first of all I want to see what I can do with that will."

"You have the papers, you say? With you?"

"Right here," and the man tapped his breast. "I carry them with me all the time."

"Is that very safe, Mr. Dogan?"

"Safe enough for me! I don't trust my papers in the hands of any one. Why, I wouldn't let you keep 'em over night in your safe yonder."

"They would be safe there."

"No doubt of that, but they wouldn't be where they are right now."

"No."

Custer Katch made a secret sign to his companion and Pinch picked up his hat.

"Come back in an hour, or after you have transacted the business in hand," he said as Sloper Pinch vanished.

Alone with Saul Dogan, Katch began to play the hand which he had already decided upon.

The visitor had opened a new field to them; he had landed a rich prize within reach of their hands, and the mere mention

of Anton Amos was enough to render them greedy.

"Are we alone?" asked Saul Dogan.

"Quite so," was the reply.

"I'd like to make sure of that first. I've been watched, you see, and I don't care to play into the hands of the other side."

"Look into the hall, then."

Dogan did so, watched like a hawk by Custer Katch, and when he came back he went on:

"I'll take those papers, Mr. Katch."

The legal sharp nearly fell off his chair.

"What papers?" he gasped.

"Why, the ones you placed in your bosom the moment I opened the door—the ones in the black pocketbook."

There was no color on the face before the man from Jersey. It was deathly in hue and almost hideously ghastly.

"You don't mean to say that, instead of Saul Dogan, you are a common plunderer?"

"What are you?"

"I am a lawyer who believed that you were not misrepresenting your cause—"

"Oh fudge!" interrupted the other. "You were just thinking how you were going to fleece me. That's why you sent your partner from the office just to get a good chance at my feathers. Come, hand over the pocketbook."

But Custer Katch sat stolid in his chair and his eyes seemed to start from his head.

"If you don't I will have to take them from you dead," and with the threat Custer Katch looked across the table into the muzzle of a six-shooter which nearly touched his face.

For once at least the blackmailer was matched.

"I give you three seconds. It is in your inside pocket. Out with it!"

Menaced by the revolver, the lawyer was compelled to surrender up the most precious documents he had ever taken from any client.

He drew forth the black pocketbook and flung it upon the table with an oath.

"He is playing a hand himself, is he?" he growled.

"Who, Mr. Katch?"

"Never mind, but we will see to that. It is yours, robber."

The pocketbook vanished inside Saul Dogan's bosom, but the eyes of Katch followed it as long as possible.

"Now good-day, sir," continued the plunderer. "You must know by this time that one hawk can rob another, and that one tiger can claw his jungle mates."

There was no reply to these words, Custer Katch glaring at his plunderer from the depths of the chair and fairly frothing at the mouth as he went out.

"In fortune's name, who is he anyhow?" he exclaimed, springing out of the chair, but halting in the middle of the room. "He came down upon us like a cyclone, and accomplished his purpose. He came from Marcus Nilson, and he may be the detective under a mask. If he is, woe to Plush Velvet, as he is called!"

Already the robber was gone.

He was on the street, and doubtless lost in the throng that swarmed the Bowery.

It took Custer Katch a full minute to recover his mental balance; when he did so he rushed from the office and down-stairs. He barely touched the steps as he descended, but when he rushed headlong from the building, it was to fall into the arms of his partner.

"Where is the thief?" cried Custer.

"How should I know? I saw Mr. Dogan come out and walk away, and I thought I would come back and see how you got along with him."

"It's all up. He did it!"

"He did what?"

"He carried them off with him."

"The bills he displayed?"

"No, the papers—the black pocketbook and all."

The explanation took Sloper Pinch's breath. He held Katch off at arm's length and stared at him.

"You don't mean to tell me that he robbed you?"

"That's just what he did."

"Why did you let him do it? I thought no man ever got the best of you."

"But I had to look into the muzzle of a

six-shooter which nearly touched my nose, and under such menace I gave them up."

"It's too bad."

The two men went back up-stairs chewing in silence the quid of bitterness.

"I know who he was," said Katch. "I saw through the mask which he assumed for the occasion. It was a bold play, but it won. We must strike back. We know the contents of those papers. I have them at my tongue's end. I know the robber, I say. He came from Marcus Nilson. It was the gold-bug's play; his supposed coup, you see. Plush Velvet, the Spotter, played the role of Saul Dogan and played it well so far as present results are concerned. He came to rob us of those papers and did so. But we will turn on the tiger; we will play out our hand now."

"But are you sure he was the robber?"

"Of course. Who else could have been? Didn't we see Marcus Nilson enter the ferret's den? Don't we know that they have met?"

"Yes."

"The plunderer was Plush Velvet, the man who is trying to discover who killed Miles Tavish and why. I'd bank my last dollar on that proposition."

Half an hour later the little office on the Bowery was vacant and the two sharks were setting a trap to catch one of the shrewdest man-hunters in Gotham.

They had no doubts as to the identity of "Saul Dogan."

CHAPTER X.

THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA.

FOR once in his infamous life Custer Katch was at fault.

The man who had plundered him at the muzzle of the revolver was not the Shadow-Ferret of the Bowery.

Plush Velvet was some squares from the scene of the robbery when it occurred and could not have played the winning hand which deprived the two sharks of one of their holds on Marcus Nilson.

The man who had assumed the role of Saul Dogan and got off with his booty almost deserved to escape entirely and certain it was that he had thrown the lawyers upon the wrong trail.

That same afternoon Plush Velvet with some business in view resolved to visit the broker in the latter's private office.

With this end in view he did not disguise himself but dressed in the good clothes which had nick-named him the dandy detective of the Bowery, he set out for the place.

The building occupied by Marcus Nilson stood in the center of a long row of similar structures, all of which were put to the uses of money in various forms, and Marcus Nilson had taken neat and small quarters which he found ample for the business he carried on.

It was three o'clock when the detective drew near to the broker's office and in a little while he entered the front room to find no one there.

The one clerk who did the clerical work of the place had stepped out for a mid-afternoon lunch leaving his master in the private room.

Plush Velvet heard voices in the little side office as he walked forward and one was couched in a suppliant tone.

The detective stopped and listened.

"You know what sort of trap you are in," said a strange voice. "I hold the secret and by this time you must be aware of that fact."

There was no reply save a low groan which the ferret overheard.

Had the bleeder of the Bowery come back? Had Custer Katch, the legal hyena, again entered the broker's office with the threat which had already extracted two thousand dollars from his coffers?

The very thought of such a thing warmed the ferret's blood.

"All you have to do will be to sign the papers on the desk yonder. I will ask nothing more. True they constitute a confession; but what of that?"

"Heavens, man, do you want to blight my life and hurry me to the grave before my proper time?"

"I want what I came after," was the re-

ply. "I am here for justice and money; the latter you can pay me some other time."

"But I have been robbed before."

"I have nothing to do with that. I am fighting my own battles, looking after number one, as it were. Come, sir. I can't remain here all day and parley. Aren't you going to sign?"

There was another remonstrance in the shape of another groan and it was followed by a laugh full of brutality and heartlessness.

Plush Velvet could stand it no longer.

Pistol in hand, for he was not sure what sort of a man he would meet face to face, he walked to the door and pushed it open.

There was a cry as he stepped forward and Marcus Nilson, crushed in his office chair and white-faced, looked at him with a mute plea for help.

Standing beside him was a well-built man dressed in a close-fitting coat, bare-headed and handsome.

His eyes had a mad glare as they fell upon the detective and in an instant Plush Velvet covered him with the six-shooter.

The stranger standing at Nilson's chair fell back with hands clinched and inwardly cursed the man who had come between.

"Who are you?" asked the ferret.

The eyes glared on, but the lips did not part.

"Get out! You have been playing a dark game which should land you in Sing Sing. You may know me."

"I do," hissed the listener. "I know you, Plush Velvet, and the knowledge will not be forgotten, I assure you."

With this he reached forward and picked up the papers on the table, after which he seized his hat and looked beyond the detective.

"The way is clear," said Porter Prince, as he stepped aside, leaving the man an avenue for escape. "I will not stand between you and liberty now."

There was no answer as the strange man came forward, and passing from the little office he nearly brushed the shadow-ferret's sleeve.

Plush Velvet heard him quit the building, when he turned his attention to the speechless man in the chair.

Marcus Nilson was the picture of fright.

His face was contorted with fear and his whole form was trembling.

"Who was that man?" asked the spotter.

"Heaven only knows. I never saw him before to-day and the infamous proposition he made makes me never want to see him again."

"What did he want?"

Plush Velvet had come in and shut the door.

Marcus Nilson looked toward the closed portal as if he half expected to see his persecutor come back with renewed power, but when he saw no one enter he looked up at the ferret once more.

"It was a terrible proposition. It meant the ruin of my life and the end of Gladys's happiness," he said. "He came in like a thunderbolt and spread his infamous net. Didn't you know him?"

A smile came to the detective's face.

"Hadn't you met him somewhere before? It is your duty, it would seem, to know all about men of his ilk. He is very dangerous and—"

"I should call him dangerous," interrupted the detective. "You say he wanted you to affix your signature to some papers which he placed on the table?"

"He did, and infamous papers they were," shuddered Nilson. "I dare not even hint at their contents, but perhaps I should make a clean breast of it to you, for so long as that man is free so long will I live in the shadow of ruin."

"Just as you please. You remember that you have already told me about your visit to Miles Tavish's room."

"And I should tell you what he wanted; yes, yes. I have no right to keep that back now."

By this time Marcus Nilson had recovered somewhat from the excitement of the strange man's visit and Plush Velvet waited for him to go on.

"The bottle on the floor there," said he, glancing at a vial lying at his feet. "That bottle contains poison."

"Poison?" echoed the ferret.

"Poison. I was between two terrible things, death by poison or slow ruin. Which one to choose I had made up my mind, but the bottle was brushed from my grasp by that man's hand and its contents have stained the carpet as you see."

"The papers consisted of two sheets; one was a confession that I visited Miles Tavish's room the night he was killed, that he was my enemy and held a damaging secret, and the other gave that man my daughter Gladys."

"The scoundrel."

"You may well call him that. He seemed to be the counterpart of Satan. Such were the propositions he made with the coolness of a fiend. Either meant for me to be under his hand, to be his slave the rest of my life."

"You never saw him before?"

"Never to my knowledge."

"What did he call himself?"

"He gave no name. He said I should know more of him after the transaction. I know enough about him now."

A sickly smile came to the broker's lips and he shuddered while it remained.

"You were to give him your daughter or be ruined?"

"Exactly. I saw what he was up to the moment I glanced at the papers on the table. It sent a chill of horror through me and in my desperation I opened the desk and took out the vial which he dashed from my hand, thus saving my miserable life."

Plush Velvet heard the clerk come back and resumed his seat.

"You trust your clerk, don't you, Mr. Nilson?"

"Trust him? Yes, he is one of the faithfuls."

"How long has he been with you?"

"Four years."

"Where does he live?"

"He has rooms on Cedar street. I was there once, about six months ago to see him when he was sick."

"You give him a holiday, now and then?"

"Whenever he wants it and business does not conflict."

"Where does he spend those holidays?"

"Really now, I don't know. I never thought to inquire, as I did not think it my business."

A moment's silence followed.

"You don't suspicion him, I trust?" asked Nilson.

"No, but he was not in when I called and you see—"

"He has a habit of taking a mid-afternoon bite over on Broadway, and I humor him."

"That's all. Now we will come back to the strange man."

"Of course. You will turn your attention to him, and from what he said, he is liable to pay you some attention himself."

"Perhaps he will," laughed Plush Velvet. "I am glad to have met him to day. He looks like a man who would carry out the most desperate of schemes."

"Indeed he does. The moment he entered the office something told me that he was dangerous and I wasn't long finding it out."

"He left no card behind? He gave you no clue as to who he is nor from whence he came?"

"Not the slightest."

"He simply came and went as mysterious in name and character as ever."

"That's it. He came like a whirlwind and went like one, only he didn't leave behind the wreck he anticipated, thanks to your arrival."

One hour later Plush Velvet emerged from the broker's private office and stepped up to the clerk bending over the books of the broker.

The clerk seemed to be so engrossed in accounts that he did not note the detective's presence.

"Good-day, Mr. Midway."

The young fellow started and looked up. He revealed a long face wearing silky side-whiskers and a pair of deep-set, uneasy eyes which indicated low cunning.

"You did not see the gentleman who left the office a few minutes ago, did you?"

"No, sir. I came back from lunch just now and must have missed him."

"That's all. I trust you enjoy good health now. Mr. Nilson told me that you were indisposed not long since."

"Yes, sir. Had the jaundice and had to be housed up as yellow as saffron for six weeks; but am all right now, thanks."

Plush Velvet left Midway at the desk and strolled into the street.

The afternoon had been one of important events. It had shown him the face of a man who had come into the game with the suddenness of a whirlwind, but it was not a face entirely strange.

He recalled the man on the steps leading to the lawyers' office on the Bowery, the person who had attempted to lift Madame Spider's veil.

While he had not seen that face under a bright light yet he had made the startling discovery that it and the one he had encountered in the broker's office were one and the same.

And what did it mean?

Simply that a new danger had been injected into the drama that the strange man was playing not only for the broker's money but for the hand of the fair Gladys.

And he knew, too, that Marcus Nilson had visited the den of his old enemy that night of the murder, and it was this knowledge with which he hoped to carry out his infamous plans.

Plush Velvet had another man to look after now and he recalled Nilson's remark that that same man might look after him at the same time.

There was truth in this remark, for as the detective left the broker's office the man whom he had confronted caught sight of him from the opposite side of the street and uttered a dark curse.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BIRD REGAINS ITS LIBERTY.

TRE little dressmaker had been captured in the Park near her rooms and had been carried off in a closed carriage by the man who had swooped down upon her with the suddenness of an eagle.

The woman into whose custody she had been placed was a shrewd and watchful creature and was not disposed to give the girl any privileges, and all Collie could do was to sit in the room whose windows were close shuttered and listen to the roar of traffic in the street beyond the house.

Since her coming to the place she had seen nothing of the man who had captured her and she wondered what had become of him. That the pair were in league there was no doubt, and the dolls' dressmaker was equally certain that they were carrying out some plot connected with the murder of Miles Tavish.

Time and again the imprisoned girl thought of Plush Velvet, her detective friend; but she had no way to communicate with him, and therefore could not acquaint him with her condition.

She wondered if he would visit her room, and if so what would he think when told by her fellow lodgers that she had not been heard from perhaps for days?

Little Miss Cormorant was in one of these reflective moods when a key turned in the lock and the woman stood before her.

"Would you like to get out, my bird?" asked the jaileress, coming forward with a faint smile on her dark face.

"You need not ask me that question," said Collie. "Where is the caged bird that does not desire its freedom?"

"Just so. Well, you needn't remain here."

The girl started with hope.

"I mean just what I say," continued the woman. "You needn't remain here an hour longer."

"I am glad to hear you say that. I have a business which, though small, suffers severely by my absence from it."

"Oh, yes, you dress dolls. I know that and your tastes are very good, too."

"You have seen some of my work then?"

"Perhaps I have, but let us get back to your release."

She approached Collie and took a bit of folded paper from her bosom.

The dressmaker anticipated what was coming and she said:

"I see. I am to be released only on conditions."

"Why, you didn't expect unconditional liberty, I hope?" cried the woman.

"But you said nothing about conditions when you first spoke and I hoped—"

"That I would open the door and tell you to go without more ado, eh? Well, this is not exactly to our notion, but you will not have to do much to get out of the 'cage,' as you call it."

Miss Cormorant waited.

She saw the skinny hands of the woman unfold the paper and lay it on the cloth.

Then she took pen and ink from the drawer and turned to the captive girl.

"All you have to do is to sign this paper."

Collie bent forward and read a moment.

"I can't sign that!" she cried, falling back and looking into the merciless face above the table.

"Very well, then; you stay here."

The paper was coolly folded again and hidden in the woman's bosom.

"You are merciless," said the girl.

"You are foolish," was the reply. "Until you sign what I have shown you this place will be your home."

"It is infamous!"

"It is all your fault. You might have told him in the Park and saved you all this trouble. Instead you chose to be stubborn and the consequence is that you are here and not making dolls' dresses on Grand street."

The woman started across the room and the girl sprung after her with a cry of anguish.

"I know nothing about what Miles Tavish did with the black pocketbook!" she cried.

"But you told the detective all you did know."

Collie stopped.

"We don't care to know anything about the black pocketbook now, for we have it fast enough. If you looked at the paper I presented for your signature, you would have seen that it was not asking you to tell us what Miles Tavish did, but it wants you to swear not to tell the detective about coming to this house."

"That was asking too much."

"Very well," heartlessly said the dark-faced woman. "You make yourself our prisoner from now on. Foolish girl! You might be enjoying pure air but for your stubbornness. But you will not, so you will have to remain in the cage."

She opened the door and looked back at the almost swooning girl in the middle of the room.

"I will die here," thought Collie Cormorant. "What if I take the oath and sign the paper? I can tell him that I am oath-bound, and he will ferret out the guilty anyhow."

She ran to the door and struck it with her clinched hand.

"What's up now?" said a voice beyond the portal.

"I will take the oath and sign the paper."

"You will, eh?"

"I will."

The door was unlocked and the jaileress came back.

"Here it is," she said, reproducing the document and placing pen and ink once more before the girl.

Miss Cormorant took the pen and was about to place her name at the bottom of the page, when a noise was heard, and the door opening once more, revealed the face and figure of her abductor.

Collie stopped and looked at him.

"What is the bird doing?" asked the man as he came forward.

"Taking the oath and getting out of here."

He stood at the table, his handsome black eyes riveted upon the little dressmaker, and she, with the pen poised above the paper, looked at him pleadingly.

"Can I get out no other way?" asked Collie.

The man shook his head.

"It is cruel," said the girl.

"It is protection for us, that's all," was the answer. "You will sign and go back to the little dresses."

Collie put her name to the document, which was, in part, a terrible oath, and the woman, reaching out, picked up the paper and tossed it to the man.

"You didn't know very much after all," grinned the man. "You might have told me what you told Plush Velvet, but you

would not, and you have been our guest a few hours. Now let her out, Nancy."

A hand fell on the girl's arm and she was led from the room.

"Blindfold her," called the man, and a hankerchief was placed over Collie's eyes.

"Must I submit to this?"

"Yes, child, for we are going to take all the precautions we can. The breaking of your oath will land you in a worse cage than this house has been. It will be the death of you."

The front door was opened and the girl was led to a carriage which stood in the gutter before the house.

"Take her back," said a woman's voice as the cab door closed.

The dolls' dressmaker fell back upon the seat as the vehicle rattled away, and for some time she seemed to be the victim of some vivid nightmare.

The journey seemed interminable and the cab turned down so many streets that she began to think that she was being taken across the city by as many turns as were possible when at last the carriage stopped.

Long before this she had succeeded in taking off the bandage, but the jolting vehicle had given her no satisfaction as to the direction in which she was moving.

As she alighted she uttered a slight cry for she was home.

Her little lodging-house rose before her to fill her with joy, and when the carriage turned away she lost no time in bounding up the steps.

She unlocked her door and entered the room so dear to her.

The past several days with their exciting events had seemed a dream to her but she had startling evidence that it all was real.

The little dressmaker turned on the gas and went over to her work-table.

Nothing had been disturbed during her absence. Everything was in its place and she dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief.

"I wonder if Plush Velvet has been here since I went off?" she asked herself. "If he came of course he found the door locked and no one could tell him where I was. And who has come to the room across the hall? Any one?"

She said no more for there was some one at her door and as a rap sounded she sprung up and crossed the room.

"Who is it?" asked Collie Cormorant.

"It is I, Miss Collie."

With a cry of joy she opened the door and ushered Plush Velvet into the room.

But the next moment with a white face, as the thought of her oath, she staggered back to the chair and buried her face in her hands.

"I have been here twice to see you," said the Bowery spotter. "I left you on guard, you know, but, some-how-or-other, you vanished and until now I have been unable to locate you. Where have you been?"

Miss Collie Cormorant threw up her hands with a gesture of remonstrance.

"I cannot tell you. I cannot give you any information on that point."

"How? you have not been out of the city?"

"No. I have been in New York all the time, but—"

"But you ought to know where you have been."

"You must not ask me, Mr. Prince. I cannot answer you and keep my promise."

"Oh," cried Plush Velvet, "a promise, then."

"More than that—an oath," said the girl, again shuddering. "I only wish I could tell you the truth. I am oath-bound. There was no way but that of getting back home."

"Keep the secret, then. Heaven forbid that I should be the person to get you to violate an oath."

"But you must go back to the trail. You must find the oath-makers; you must not step from the trail of blood and mystery till all as been made clear!"

"I don't intend to," answered the Bowery ferret. "Though you cannot aid me just now, the time will come when you will be at liberty to speak."

"I trust it may."

"I will see that it comes! That is my business."

The little dressmaker did not speak.

"The room yonder has been visited again," continued Plush Velvet, nodding toward the door. "How long have you been home?"

"Perhaps thirty minutes."

"And all was silent across the way when you came in?"

"I did not hear any noise."

"Nor see any one?"

"No."

"Well, as I have said, the woman with the veil has been here again. She came and went just before you reached home."

"And you saw her?"

Plush Velvet nodded.

"Do you know her?" eagerly asked Collie. "You are not oath-bound like myself and you can answer me."

"But you must remember that I am a detective and that we keep secrets."

"Pardon me. That is right. Keep the secret."

"But you will keep it with the other one you have. I know the woman. She was the wife of Miles Tavish, but she did not kill him. I think I know who did."

The little dressmaker uttered a cry of surprise; but Plush Velvet did not further enlighten her.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHARKS' TRAP.

PLUSH VELVET, the ferret, did not know, as yet, that Custer Katch and his partner had been robbed.

The detective of the Bowery was yet to learn that some one had entered the den of the two sharks and deliberately plundered them of their trump card.

Dogan, the Man from Jersey, so-called, had played a cool hand and the lawyers believed the blow had been struck by the shadow sport of New York.

So positive of this was Custer Katch that he had sworn vengeance against Plush Velvet and had resolved to pay him back in his own coin and show him that he was not to be robbed with impunity.

In this he was seconded by Sloper Pinch, a man as desperate as himself, and the two put their heads together for a coup which would retrieve their lost fortunes and show Plush Velvet that he could not play a hand like that without receiving a blow just as terrible.

Custer Katch, with the unsavory record he had—a record hinted at by Madame Spider, as Mrs. Tavish called herself—was ready to stoop to anything which promised to make him gold, for he had by no means given up the golden game which he and his partner in law and crime had opened.

Plush Velvet, after his interview with Miss Cormorant after that little woman's return home in the exciting manner detailed in the foregoing chapter, went to his little room on the Bowery.

The dressmaker was not so much in his mind as was another person who had lately taken a prominent place in it.

He could not forget the man whom he found with Marcus Nilson at the broker's office, the cool head who was about to force Nilson to sign certain papers which the broker called infamous.

When he remembered that he had seen this man face to face with Mrs. Tavish on the steps leading to the office of Katch and Pinch, he saw that he was a factor in the game of murder and mystery and from that time he had given him a good deal of attention.

Who was he and where had he come from?

Night, which had settled down once more over Gotham, had swarmed the Bowery as usual and the human tide ebbed and flowed under the gaslights.

Plush Velvet, wrestling with the last incidents in the case was alone.

He expected no visitors at that hour and his door was not locked. In fact, it was seldom locked when he was at home, and on this occasion he sat at the little table with some memoranda before him.

The nearest clock struck eleven and the clear tones reached the ears of the detective who looked up and listened to the last strokes.

All at once the door opened and Plush Velvet looked in that direction.

In the doorway stood a little girl who was not a stranger to him.

"What is it, Nellie?"

The child, who had flaxen hair and deep, fair eyes, came forward but stopped at the table.

Plush Velvet leaned forward and put a hand on the girl's head.

She smiled sadly.

"You have been out," said the spotter. "You haven't been looking for pennies again, I hope?"

"Not to-night. But I have made money. See!" and the little one pulled a hand from her dress pocket and displayed a lot of silver in the scanty palm.

"You are very lucky," remarked Plush Velvet. "Let me see. You have sixty-five cents there and that makes you rich, Nellie."

"Not as rich as the man who emptied it into my hand. I did not ask him for a penny, but he handed me a letter for you and told me that if I would deliver it and say nothing about it he would make me happy."

"A letter for me? Where is it, Nellie?"

The detective held out his hand and waited.

"I have it here," and Nellie ran one hand into her bosom a moment and produced a letter which she handed to her friend.

Plush Velvet took it and leaned forward.

"Where was the man when he gave you this?"

"Down on the corner. He stopped me when I came along and produced the letter."

"What did he look like?"

"He was a slender man with whiskers quite black, but somehow or other they did not seem to match his hair."

The ferret smiled.

"But you were to give me the letter and say nothing, weren't you?"

"That was what the man said, but I don't think I promised him that I would do all that. I know what you did for me that cold night when I was lost near the docks. You found me a warm bed and I like you, Plush Velvet."

The ferret sport drew the child to him and looked down into her lustrous eyes.

With the other hand he opened the letter and spread the sheet upon the table.

The letter was brief and its very brevity made the detective smile again.

He read:

"If Plush Velvet wants a certain clue to the death of Miles Tavish he will come at once to No. — Bleecker street, third floor, to the right, second door. The clue awaits him there."

"It isn't very long," said the child, looking up into the ferret's face.

"Not very, Nellie. It didn't take the man very long to write this letter."

Nellie's gaze sought out the sheet, but she did not try to master its contents.

"Was the man there when you came away?" asked Plush Velvet.

"I left him on the corner."

"A slender man, with a beard darker than his hair, eh?"

"I thought so."

Plush Velvet folded the sheet, and placed it in an inside pocket.

"It is important, isn't it?"

"Quite so, child. You will go home now, for I am going out."

"To that man?"

"I don't know. Don't you like him?"

"I don't."

"Was he very eager that I should have the letter right away?"

"He wanted you to get it as soon as possible. I promised to get it to you, and when he gave me the money—he just poured it into my hand—I bolted off to you."

They went out together, the detective locking his door behind him, and in the hallway on the lower floor he said to Nellie:

"Nellie, you are the only person besides me and that man who knows that the letter was delivered to-night."

"Yes, sir."

"I may or may not go to the writer of this letter. You will come here to-morrow, say at seven o'clock."

"I will be here, Plush Velvet."

"If you find my door locked you will turn back and tell this man that I am in danger."

"What man?" asked Nellie, her eyes dilating with wonder.

The detective was writing an address on a card.

When he finished talking he handed it to the child who, with one look at it, stuck it in her pocket.

"I will tell him," she said. "But you are not going into danger."

"I hope not."

Plush Velvet and the child went out into the light and separated, he going one way while the little girl watched him with longing eyes, as if her best friend was going from her forever.

Nellie Simms lost Plush Velvet in the crowd that swept over the Bowery's stones, and after a minute of watching, she turned away with a sigh.

"He's been good to me," she said, "and I like him. At seven to-morrow I will be at his door, and if he isn't there, I will tell the gentleman whose name is on the card."

Meantime the Bowery spotter was on his way to the number on Bleecker street.

He went by way of the corner where the child had been stopped to receive the letter for him, but no slender man with a beard darker than his hair was there.

"A clue to the mystery of Grand street, eh?" ejaculated Plush Velvet as a car bore him to his new destination. "Why didn't the man deliver the note himself? Did he know that Nellie, the little one, haunts the corner after dark and that she knows me and always can get to me when I am not to be seen by others? It looks that way," and the detective lapsed into silence and neared the place he sought.

Landed in Bleecker street, he left the car and took to the sidewalk.

He knew the street like a book.

A recent trail of crime which led through the famous thoroughfare had acquainted him with all its dark places and dens, and he was enabled to say to himself that it would have to be a good trap that caught him in Bleecker street.

Plush Velvet was at the number just after midnight.

There were few people out there at that hour and they were for the most part late revelers who were more or less in the grasp of the drink demon.

He found the number to be a tall building, one of those human beehives that lift their heads in some parts of New York, and as usual the lower door was open.

"Third floor, to the right, second door," said Plush Velvet half-aloud, repeating the directions of the letter. "I will soon know what his clue is if he has one."

He mounted one flight of steps and then another.

He found the third landing dark enough and very quiet.

As he turned to the right a rat ran between his legs and some woman in a room near by uttered an oath which died away like a dismal cry.

Plush Velvet found the second door and stopped there.

Over the transom gleamed a light, not very bright, but a light all the same, and the detective laid his hand on the knob.

The crisis had come.

Beyond that door might lie a terrible death and there might be faced the trap which yawned for him in that living beehive.

But the man who had come from the Bowery with his eyes open was not the person to draw back at this juncture.

He opened the door, but at the same time he cocked a revolver which he gripped in his right hand.

The room was rather well lit up, and the detective saw a man seated at a table half-way across the apartment.

The stranger started and his face lost color.

"I am here," said Plush Velvet, advancing with the pistol on a level with the man's face. "I got your letter. Now let us to business."

The man in the chair took a second to recover in. He looked at the determined spotter and into the menacing muzzle of the revolver. Both face and pistol looked deadly.

"I don't propose to talk while I am covered with a six-shooter," growled the man.

"You don't, eh? You don't intend to spring the trap while I have the advantage. Is that it, sir?"

"What trap?"

"Come! You know why I was sent for—you played a cool hand. A clue to the Grand street mystery, eh? Where is it, Custer Katch?"

The man seemed to recoil and nearly fall from his chair.

"Have you removed to this place? It isn't a very nice office, but flies may come to the web here as well as anywhere else. And your partner? Has he moved with you, or will he continue to fleece the sheep on the Bowery?"

There was no reply.

The eyes that regarded the detective seemed ready to drop from their owner's head, and Custer Katch, unmasked in such a summary manner, only stammered a protestation that it was no trap.

"Very well, then. I will listen to the clue, or is it so tangible that I can see it?" inquired Plush Velvet.

"I can give you nothing while that revolver is at my head," was the reply.

"You intended to give me no clue in the first place. You have set a trap for me, and now that I am in it with my eyes open, Custer Katch, you dare not spring the deadfall."

CHAPTER XIII.

KATCH AND PINCH DISSOLVE.

THE Lawyer Shark of the Bowery got second wind while the detective talked.

He sent a glance toward one of the side walls and seemed to wait for a signal.

"You will not give me the clue you wrote about, I see," continued Plush Velvet. "Very well, Mr. Katch, I will proceed to talk a little myself."

"I will have no communication with you. I am not here to talk with a revolver at my head, I tell you."

"Then you will not talk at all. I will do the talking, I tell you."

Custer Katch made no reply.

"You haven't a very savory reputation."

"I'm an honest lawyer, but you're not the first man who has insulted me."

"Insulted you?" and Plush Velvet smiled. "Pardon me. I was not aware that you were so thin-skinned that a reference to your past insults you. You came from the South, I believe."

No answer.

"You once got into a scrape down there, a scrape just serious enough to bring you before a court of justice; but you wriggled out of the affair with that finesse with which you wriggle out of some dubious charges nowadays."

"By Jove! this is too much," cried the lawyer.

"In your case it never rains but it pours, eh, Mr. Katch?"

"I refuse to speak."

"When you gave the little one some money to carry to me the decoy letter, did you expect to see me enter the trap with the innocence of the fawn? Were you waiting here with your hand on the trigger which should drop the deadfall and do the business? What have you against me, Custer Katch, honest lawyer of the Bowery, and what do you know about the death of Miles Tavish?"

"Then, why are you so anxious to get me out of your way? Is your partner just as anxious? And when you bled Marcus Nilson the other day, deliberately held the old man up and robbed him of two thousand, were you expecting to repeat the operation when Mr. Pinch met Miss Gladys in the private office?"

"Curse you, I tell you that I will have nothing to say to you to-night!"

"Not even in the trap you had set for me?"

"Nowhere," snapped Custer Katch.

Plush Velvet had to smile at the dilemma in which the lawyer had got himself.

Sitting before him still wearing the false beard which had attracted Nellie Simms' keen eyes, Custer Katch looked guilty to the man of trails, and for half a minute Plush Velvet eyed him with utter contempt.

"It's a bold cool hand you two are playing," said the detective. "You can't hope to win in the blackmail scheme nor in the deeper plot. I know what sort of men you

two are and I shall take care that Marcus Nilson is no longer bled by the lancets which you carry in your case."

"You can go a little too far with your charges," hissed the shark. "I will cease after awhile to submit to such language, no matter if it does fall from the lips of a human tracker."

"You will, eh? You will resent it? Very well. Now is an excellent time for that kind of work."

Plush Velvet having faced the man and exposed him enough for that night withdrew toward the door.

He saw the gleaming eyes of the shark fastened upon him and his hand was at the knob when Custer Katch seemed to leap forward.

"You will cease to blackmail the broker," said Plush Velvet. "You must quit now, or you will never get another client into your rascally net on the Bowery."

"That's a threat."

"It is a threat which means just what the words imply."

"Curse you—"

The man broke his own sentence.

"Go!" he cried, pointing at the door. "We need not face one another any longer. We understand each other, and if I am not man enough for Plush Velvet, then I will sell out and go back to the South."

He ended his sentence with a derisive laugh after which he settled back into his chair.

The ferret gave him another look and said "good-night," which was responded to. He left Custer Katch in his chair with a white face and his long thin hands clinched.

"I have failed," he cried as the door closed on the detective. "I have lost my old-time nerve. I had my hand on the cord, but I hadn't the pluck to press it. What will Sloper say, and after I promised to snare the evil genius of our lives? He may have had the stolen papers in his bosom. Of course he would not trust them anywhere else. But I hadn't the nerve of a fly."

He sprung up and bounded across the room.

He opened the door with a revolver in his hand.

Custer Katch with the eyes of a murderer leaned out into the hall and looked down the stairs.

On the lower steps and plainly seen in the light that shone there was the figure of a man.

Plush Velvet, the detective, was going away flushed with triumph; he was carrying back to Marcus Nilson, back to the trail, the victory which he had just scored. It was too much.

Custer Katch with a heart that beat like a panting tiger's took another step and covered the form on the flight.

No one could miss a target like that.

He said nothing; he did not send after his enemy a hiss which would warn him of the impending danger, but pressed the trigger and then fell back himself as the whole house seemed to be filled with the report.

He did not wait to see what result his shot had had.

He seemed to have heard a heavy fall, and this told him that he had not missed the human target.

For three minutes he shut himself up in the room with his eyes glued on the door, as if waiting for it to open and a mob to pour into the room.

He still gripped the pistol which could have been taken from him by a child.

But no one came in. The portal was not burst open and no one rushed forward to accuse him of having killed a man on the stair steps!

"Maybe I missed him after all," thought the lawyer.

He crossed the room and opened the door. He heard voices in the hall and looking down he saw that the landing was crowded with the denizens of the old trap.

No, he had not missed from what floated up to him.

"He must have been shot from overhead," said a voice. "At any rate the report seemed to come from up there and my old man jumped out of bed with a yell."

"The wound will show where the bullet came from when they cut 'im up," piped another voice. "If from up there you may be sure that they'll know it."

"He wasn't missed, then," said Custer Katch to himself. "I got the man and they don't suspect me. Now I shall get away, but first the other thing. I have been here long enough and the match will destroy the trap."

He went to work and overturned the little couch that stood in one corner of the room; then piled the chairs upon it and took from a small cupboard a can of kerosene which he poured over the heap.

There was no trembling in his hands now; the nerves were as strong as steel, and he was cool-headed—more so than when he found himself faced by Plush Velvet, the shadow-sport.

Lawyer Katch did not stop till he had made everything ready for a fire.

As if he had foreseen what had taken place, or something akin to it, he laid a prepared train to the saturated heap and the last act before slipping from the door was to apply a match.

There was a rear exit from the old trap. It led down into a back yard, and thence to an alley which in turn would take him to a street.

Custer Katch descended, confident that he was escaping the nemesis of his crime. He crossed the cramped yard; he dodged in and out among the rubbish and at last gained the street.

There was a crowd in front of the house. The denizens of the street had been roused by what had taken place. The lawyer secure in his disguise looked on a moment and saw the crowd part as two policemen came out carrying something that had a ghastly human shape.

As they bore the body toward the patrol wagon which had been summoned, Custer Katch went forward impelled by a curiosity which he could not keep down.

He pushed his way up to the wagon and leaned over the shoulders of the nearest people for a look at the dead man's face. In the exuberance of his demoniac joy he wanted to look at the face of Plush Velvet whose career he had terminated on the staircase.

One look was enough and Custer with a gasp reeled back and nearly sunk to the stones.

What he had seen was enough to unnerve him for all time. He had looked into the staring eyes of a dead man; he had noted the angular jaws and the sharp features of a man with whom he was on the closest terms, not Plush Velvet, the ferret, but Sloper Pinch, his partner!

Custer Katch fled from the spot.

As if a legion of devils was at his heels he almost ran. It was anything to get away from what he had seen.

"In the name of heaven, how came he there, and why didn't I see that it wasn't the ferret?" he cried. "I looked and shot, that's how it happened. What a fool I was. Worse than a fool!"

There was no stopping for the man until he drew up in the little den on the Bowery.

He locked the door behind him and turned on the light.

His face was still white and ghastly. He jerked the false beard from his face and flung it to the floor.

"If they find it out—if Plush Velvet heard the report and hears that Sloper was the victim, what show have I got to cheat the gallows? None. Curse that fatal mistake! but I would have sworn that the man on the flight was the ferret, for hadn't he just left me? I couldn't think otherwise and I wanted to play a hand for both Sloper and me."

He had played it. He had played a card which fate had placed in his hand, and there was blood on his soul, not the blood of an enemy, but of a friend.

Custer Katch sat like a man in a maze of terror through the rest of that night.

He heard footsteps come up-stairs, but none stopped at his door.

It was daylight when he moved. He went to the window and looked out.

As yet the streets had received none of their human tide and the ebb and flow had not begun.

"Haven't they recognized Sloper yet?" cried Katch. "Don't they know him? What have they done with the body anyhow?"

He put on his hat and went out. The

avenue of escape had not been closed to him.

No one but the dead man knew that he had taken the room in the Bleeker street house to entrap the detective, and if his fire-trap had not failed him the old place was in ashes.

Thus encouraged, Custer Katch sought the street.

"Who'd have thought that the firm would be dissolved with a bullet?" he said. "Who would have dreamed that I would shoot Sloper dead through mistake and thus break up the firm of Katch & Pinch? What will be the newspapers' theory? What will Plush Velvet do?—look for the man whom he faced last night? If he does—"

Custer ceased and turned a corner increasing his gait as he went on.

Suddenly he was checked in what was becoming a flight from the scene of crime and a hand was laid on his arm.

"Are you going back to Talledaga, Custer Katch?"

He fell back as far as that hand would let him. He looked into the face upon which the light fell and then seemed to lose every vestige of nerve.

He was confronted by the widow of Miles Tavish—the creature known also as Madame Spider, and in another instant he was walking back with her.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE COILS OF THE UNKNOWN.

HAVING exposed and escaped from the snare which Custer Katch had spread for him, Plush Velvet the Bowery ferret left the old house in Bleeker street without meeting Sloper Pinch who came in in time to meet with an untimely death at the hands of his partner.

The detective did not return home though it was past midnight, but entered a street which he had heard mentioned by Marcus Nilson.

Plush Velvet had seen enough of the man to suspect that he knew something of the person who had tried to force the broker to sign certain papers, but who had been balked in his designs by the timely arrival of the ferret.

The house occupied by Midway was a queer looking affair totally unlike its neighbors inasmuch as it was old and needed a coat of paint. It was easily distinguishable even in the uncertain light of the street lamp, and Plush Velvet reached it about half an hour after quitting Lawyer Katch's trap.

If Palos Midway was a meek-looking man at the desk he was another being in other places as the detective had discovered while devoting a little time to the bookkeeper, and it was not an uncommon occurrence for the clerk to remain out all night, so his landlady had informed an old-looking man who had drawn from her some of her lodger's eccentricities.

Plush Velvet finding himself before the house and noticing how quiet was the neighborhood, glided along the walls and gained the steps.

Mrs. Deady the housekeeper had unsuspectingly related to the disguised detective how Mr. Midway was so peculiar that he would not carry a latch-key, but preferred coming in with door left open for him, after which he would bolt it from the inside and retire.

Plush Velvet tried the door on the occasion of his visit and found that it opened.

In another moment he was on the inside and on his way up-stairs.

He tried a key on a certain door near the top of the steps and let himself into what was easily seen belonged to some bachelor's quarters.

Palos Midway was a man who, exact with his accounts, was not so with his belongings at home.

The room was not very clean or tidy, but the detective closed the door and began to search it. There seemed to be no method in the arrangement of things about the room and he examined the various articles of furniture there.

In a drawer at the table which he was compelled to unlock he found a package of letters which he took out. They were addressed to Palos Midway and the first ones.

looked at seemed common-place enough. They had been mailed in the city and were signed with two initials—"R. R."

The last one of these and the freshest was dated the day before his encounter with the stranger in the private office and ran as follows:

"Be sure and take lunch at three to-morrow. Try and be as hungry as possible and you won't regret it."

"R. R."

The detective read this over twice before he replaced it in the drawer.

"Midway was at lunch when the stranger called and tried to make Nilson sign the papers," he thought. "The man was in the private office when I called, and Midway, who must have seen him quit it, for he must have been at the door when the villain went out, denied all knowledge of the man to me. This is something. It almost demonstrates that Midway and the handsome scoundrel are acquainted and that the clerk is in collusion with him."

Nothing more than this rewarded the detective in the clerk's lodgings.

He slipped from the house with the same caution by which he had entered it and was gone.

"Now for home," said he.

The streets by this time had very few pedestrians; here and there stood the statu-esque policeman, and now and then the detective encountered a man whose shadow fell across the pave as he hurried on underneath the lamps.

Three squares from the house which had yielded him a little clue Plush Velvet saw a carriage turn a corner.

It was a common occurrence, but the next moment it came toward the sidewalk where he was.

As the vehicle turned into the gutter the horses were reined in and a head was thrust from the window.

"Can you help me?" cried a voice. "Will you let a man be dragged into the web by a lot of human spiders?"

Plush Velvet caught sight of a white face and a hatless head and the next moment he was at the carriage window.

The door was thrown open in his face.

"I am helpless here," said the same voice. "I am utterly helpless, because I am bound and—"

The detective was at the step and his hands were inside when they were seized as with a grip of iron.

In another instant he was jerked into the vehicle, and as he was thrown against the other side and held down, he heard the cab start off again.

"Drive like the Old Harry!" cried a strange voice. "We have caught the fly and that is enough."

Away went the carriage with the ferret in the grip of unknown fiends, and the wheels at times seemed to miss the stones of the streets in their mad revolutions.

Plush Velvet knew that he had fallen into the hands of two men, but who they were or what they looked like, he could not tell for the dim light that prevailed.

The cramped place in which he had tried to struggle afforded him no help, and by the time he was exhausted he had been manacled, and was lying back in the cab, trying to get breath through a handkerchief which had been tied over his mouth.

He could not tell how far he had been carried when the carriage stopped.

The horses were driven into an alley and pulled up alongside a brick wall.

One of the men sprung out as the carriage door was thrown open, and Plush Velvet followed, being pulled from the corner by the other one.

"Open the door in the wall!" said the man who held the ferret.

The other sprung forward and unlocked a gateway in the wall, and then both men seized Plush Velvet, and he was carried into a place as dark as the tombs of Egypt.

All this seemed the creation of some nightmare, rather than anything approaching reality.

The surprise on the sidewalk, the overpowering in the carriage, and the ride to the alley, had the semblance of romance which clings to so many exciting events of city life; but the detective knew that it was ter-

ribly real, and that he had fallen into the hands of merciless foes.

From the inside of the wall it was but a few steps to a house, and the shutting of a door behind him told him that he had reached what might prove the tomb not only of his hopes, but of his body as well.

"We'll see you later," said a voice, as Plush Velvet was crushed into a chair, still manacled and gagged. "This is about the most exciting game you have been in for some time, eh?"

He would have subscribed to this declaration without reserve. He had never met with a play like that one, and in all his career he had not once been duped by a cry from a midnight carriage.

Plush Velvet must have remained in the chair fully an hour.

He had no way of computing time, but after a long while the door opened again admitting light, and he was confronted by a man who came in and stood before him.

"Still here?" said this one, mockingly. "I guess you don't recognize me."

The detective had heard that voice before. He had seen the athletic figure somewhere, and all at once it flashed across his mind that he was looking at the stranger encountered in Marcus Nilson's office.

There was no doubt of it now.

"You shouldn't have been out so late," continued the man. "I knew you the moment the light shone upon you and I thought my time had come to pay you back."

The detective made no reply.

What he might have said would not have been very intelligible with the handkerchief over his mouth, and seeing this the stranger stepped forward and removed it.

"The catcher gets caught sometimes, doesn't he, Mr. Velvet?" the Unknown went on after a pause. "He comes to grief now and then just as you came to grief this morning."

"One cannot expect to win all the time."

"True, and no one knows that better than yourself. You were going home, eh? You were going back after a night of work. On the Grand street trail, were you?"

"What if I were?"

"Oh," with a wave of the hand, "it really matters but little to me what you were doing. You see you had the audacity to cover me with a revolver just when I was in the midst of a little business of my own, and I concluded to get back at you the first opportunity that presented itself."

"Then this makes us even?"

"By no means. Even? When you spoiled my game and let my pigeon get away? I rather think not, Mr. Velvet. When a man is covered with a six-shooter he is placed at a disadvantage and can't have his own way. Would you have let me had it if I had not desisted?"

"Do you think so?"

"There's no telling, and acting on the belief that you intended to bore me through which would have been very unpleasant for me, I am going to show you a thing or two."

The Unknown stepped back and folded his arms.

He looked like a veritable athlete in the middle of the room as he drew his figure to its full height and looked at the helpless detective.

"You are in a trap this time from which nothing can ever release you," he resumed.

"Which means that you intend to put me out of your way."

"That is right. You are in my way in more ways than one, Plush Velvet. I do not hesitate to tell you, now that I have you completely in my power, that you are the only man I dread of the many of your kind who hunt their fellow-men and unravel mysteries. You are the only man of them all whose acumen threatens to deprive me of fortune and happiness. With you out of the way I can go back and win the game I am playing. With you in my way I may fail. See? Do you think under these circumstances that I would let you get away from this house? I took chances when I saw you on the street for you are quick and strong; I had to take such chances win or lose. I have won!"

He laughed at the conclusion of his last sentence and Plush Velvet felt anew that he was in dangerous clutches.

"You have ten minutes in which to pre-

pare for death. You have given men less time than that, but I will be merciful. Ten minutes. It is short time, but to some men it has been an eternity. The change will come at the end of that time as sure as day succeeds night. You will prepare, Plush Velvet."

The Unknown stepped to the wall behind him, threw back one hand and pressed a button set in the wainscoting. A door opened and he vanished.

"Remember!" said a voice from the further side of the wall. "I have been merciful, Plush Velvet. With you out of the way I win. With you at large I fail. Do you blame me?"

That was all.

The voice died away and silence fell over the captured ferret. He saw that light remained in the room coming through a round glass window five-feet from the floor.

Ten minutes in which to die—to die like an imprisoned rat—to be struck down perhaps by the bullet of an invisible slayer, or to be killed in some terrible manner as yet unseen or undreamed of!

Plush Velvet rose and walked to the round window; but as he glued his face to the glass he was blinded by a flash of light, and with a cry he fell away, tottering across the chamber like a drunkard.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED COMPACT.

CUSTER KATCH the lawyer captured by Madame Spider while in full flight from the scene of his crime felt that he had fallen into the clutches of one who knew what he had done.

He had not seen the woman since her visit to the office on the Bowery when she faced him and demanded to know what had become of her husband Anton Amos or Miles Tavish.

"Where are you going?" asked the lawyer shark.

"Not very far from here. You shall see in a little while."

Custer Katch said no more, but allowed himself to be led away although he could have darted down an alley and escaped.

Mrs. Tavish took him to a house in the near neighborhood of his capture and let them both in with a latch-key.

The lawyer breathed freer. It was not a police-station and that was something.

Locking the door behind them, Madame Spider led the way to a darkened parlor at one side of the hall where she suddenly turned upon Katch with a light laugh.

"Did you think I was running you into the jaws of the police?" she asked.

"I didn't know whether you were taking me," was the reply. "You live here?"

"Perhaps. I am here at any rate. We will talk now."

On what subject? The lawyer could guess.

For a moment the woman looked at Custer Katch and then said as she leaned slightly forward, her gloved hands resting on the arms of the chair she occupied:

"You did not lie to me this time. He is dead."

"I told you so."

"He was killed?"

"Yes."

"Killed on Grand street after midnight."

"So the police reported."

"The room was ransacked, too."

"By the person who killed him?"

"Of course, for it was ransacked the same night."

"They seem to be at work on the mystery—so I hear at any rate; but as yet they haven't found much."

"At any rate the hand that slew him has not been caught."

"I believe not."

Madame Spider was silent for a moment.

"What became of the papers he had made out—the history of a certain man's past and the story of a human life?"

Katch thought of the cool robbery which had deprived him and his partner of those very documents.

"How should I know?" he said shrugging his shoulders.

"You deny, then, that he confided anything to your care?"

"Why should your husband leave anything with us when there were deposit companies almost within stone's throw of where he lived."

"He always had an aversion for such things," was the reply. "He left those papers elsewhere."

"And died with the secret untold, eh?"

"Perhaps, or with it half let out."

"How?"

Madame Spider drew a bit of paper from her pocket and opening it, showing that it was but a fragment, she handed it to the lawyer.

It was one half of the business card of "Katch & Pinch, Lawyers, The Bowery."

Custer Katch took it and seeing what it was at a glance, looked up inquiringly.

"That tells half the secret," continued Madame Spider. "He was a strange man and that torn card was the only receipt he took—the sole memorandum he made of that transfer."

"Where did you find this?"

"In his room."

"When?"

"After I left your office. He left those papers with you, Custer Katch."

The look of the woman was as accusative as her words and the law sharp could not avoid either.

"Come, what have you done with them?" and Madame Spider rose and came menacingly toward him. "I am determined to do two things—find those papers and the person who killed him."

"I haven't got the papers, nor do I know where they are at this time."

"No falsehoods, Custer Katch."

"By the living—"

"No such oaths, if you please," interrupted the woman. "I will not listen to them. You had them?"

"We had."

"In your possession? He brought them to you?"

"He did."

"When?"

"The day he was murdered."

The woman started.

"What did you do with them?"

"We treated them like we treat all important papers left in our care; we placed them in the safe."

"Without looking at them?"

Madame Spider seemed to touch the man with her tensely drawn face.

"You opened those papers; you broke the seal; you wanted a hold on some one."

There was no reply.

"You got that hold and you have been using it since. You have been blackmailing a well-known broker of New York and you got your cue from the papers of the dead."

All this was true; but how had the woman found it out?

"Custer Katch," said Mrs. Tavish, solemnly, "you don't know who might have killed him?"

"I do not."

"Will you swear that you had no hand in it?"

"I?" cried the lawyer. "I have a hand in his death? What do you mean?"

"His death would have benefited you. With him out of the way, and the secret of the papers in your possession, see how nicely you could blackmail the broker."

This was putting a fact very plainly. It emphasized in a terrible manner the benefits that would accrue to the lawyers from the death of their client.

"But we had no hand in his death. It happened to come on the day he saw us, that was all, a startling coincidence."

"A crimson coincidence, wasn't it?" smiled the woman. "It was a good-sized fish landed by fortune in your net."

"Yes."

"Very well. Now, Mr. Katch, you must help me."

"Help you?" cried the lawyer.

"Why not? While I don't trust your honor very far I trust it some. I can open up a sealed chapter in my late husband's life—one which the detectives would like to have just now."

"Then, why don't you go to them with it if you want to ferret out the guilty?"

"Not yet; not until I have exhausted some clues myself."

"Oh, you have a clue, then?"

"I know one of my husband's secrets, one which he did not see fit to leave with you."

Custer Katch made no reply, but waited for her to proceed. This was better than running headlong from the city of his crime. After all he might remain and escape serious consequences following the death of Sloper Pinch.

"My husband had an enemy, one who at one time inveigled himself into his very life as it were. From that man my husband kept few secrets; they were much together and, until three days ago, I thought that man was either under the sod or a thousand miles from here. But he is in this city."

"In New York?"

"Here! He turns up like an evil genius. He comes upon the stage of action, and I meet him after dark."

"To be recognized?" cried Custer Katch, with a start.

"No, to know him despite the work of the years and to track him home."

"That is better."

"This man is dangerous and I told my husband so years ago. He is as dangerous now as then. He would stoop to anything to gain his ends, and when desperate, as he nearly always was, he was desperation personified."

"Who is he?"

"What his name was when he worked the spell on Miles Tavish as you call him, matters not. To-day he is Rufus Reck."

"I don't know him."

"Perhaps not."

"What is he like? We have seen so many men in our office—"

"But this man would not be likely to be a client of yours," interrupted Madame Spider. "At least I don't see why he should come your way for anything."

"But he would like to have those papers; you intimate this."

"They would be worth their weight in gold to Rufus Reck," answered the woman.

"Maybe he and not the other man robbed us."

Unconsciously Custer Katch spoke aloud.

"Ha, you've been robbed, then?"

A grin seemed to spread over the lawyer's leathery face.

"In the first place, describe this Rufus Reck to me," he said.

"As he was then and is now. You shall have a picture of my husband's enemy."

Madame Spider proceeded and gave the lawyer a striking word-photograph of the man in question. It was complete in every detail, and as she proceeded Custer Katch grew nervous and seemed at times to lift himself from his chair.

"It was Rufus Reck and not the detective, as we thought," he cried. "Heavens, if I had but known this sooner, he would not be where he is now!"

Madame Spider did not understand these words; but she said nothing.

"So you believe that this man robbed you of those papers? You gave them up to some one?"

"Only at the revolver's muzzle," said Katch. "He carried them off and escaped."

"Now, you can see why I feel that an alliance with you will help me. I will not trust these men-hunters of New York. I want to divide with no one. You did not kill Miles Tavish for his secret; he was killed after leaving the documents with you, and afterward you were robbed, you say by Rufus Reck."

"Your description of the man betrays several little peculiarities which he let out while in our office."

"That is good. I must be on the right trail. You are with me Custer Katch?"

"If I can be of any service to you, you may command me."

"You can be of service, else I would not have stopped you on the street. I know where Rufus Reck lives; I have discovered one or more of his haunts. I have tracked him to Marcus Nilson's office."

"To that place?" cried the lawyer.

"Why not? If he has the papers, you know what a weapon he has. You were using that same weapon yourself up to the time you were robbed."

Custer winced.

"Never mind; you needn't start," smiled

the woman. "Give me those papers and I will show you how to fleece a golden lamb. I want money like some other folks. I can supplement those documents with other secrets. Don't forget for a moment that I have been the wife of Miles Tavish, so-called. Don't forget that, Custer Katch," and she laughed while the lawyer stared at her, saying nothing.

"You are with me, aren't you? We will enter into a combine for each other's benefit. You will please keep this alliance from your partner, Sloper Pinch?"

Custer Katch smiled most grimly. He knew he could not tell the dead anything; and Madame Spider could not fathom the meaning of that smile.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MAN WHO VANISHED.

PLUSH VELVET, the imprisoned detective, was so blinded by the light streaming through the oval window of the room, that he lost all consciousness of his surroundings.

He did not know how long he remained in this condition, for when he came back to life as it were he was in total darkness.

His first thought was that he was the occupant of some underground prison, but when he rose and walked forward he brought up suddenly against a smooth wall, and staggered back.

One thing happened during his unconsciousness and that was the freeing of his hands.

They were no longer manacled, and it was with joy that he found that he could stretch them out and feel his way around the room.

But was he in the same place? If so where was the oval window?

He looked and felt in vain for the glass through which had flashed the blinding light. He circled the room and failed to find it. This told him that he was not in the same chamber, though the dimensions seemed the same.

Plush Velvet may have taken another ride. He might have been conveyed from the scene of his incarceration to some other prison, and he was very anxious to find out.

As the Unknown had told him that he was to die in ten minutes, he was at a loss to know why he had been respite.

What had intervened to save him?

For some time the ferret of the Bowery remained in ignorance of where he was, and what had taken place.

He recalled his instructions to Nellie Simms.

If another day had come and the child had called at his office at the hour appointed, then she must have delivered the card to the party whose name he had traced on it for her.

There was hope in this thought.

But had another day come?

Housed in stygian darkness, it was difficult for the detective to answer this question.

He went to the wall of the chamber and listened.

He heard the well-known noises of the city street, and after awhile the cry of the newsboy.

This betokened the arrival of another day.

One of these little venders of news seemed to have stopped directly in front of the house in which Plush Velvet was immured.

His call came to the listening detective, and he heard every word distinctly.

"I say, Nippers, how many has you sold?" suddenly said a voice.

"All but three. I tell you I'se been makin' a speciality of de murder on Bleecker street, an' dat's what sells de papers dis mornin'."

"What's de bloke's name dat got killed?"

"W'y, he's one o' de Bowery lawyers, Sloper Pinch. But come, buy de paper if you kin read and get de 'ticulars."

This was what Plush Velvet heard in prison.

Sloper Pinch killed in Bleecker street?

He recalled his own adventure there with Custer Katch, whose trap had failed to secure him, and now the law shark's partner had been killed in that same street!

It was news to the detective, sure enough.

Who would deliberately kill Sloper Pinch? What hand had stricken that man down in his sins? Here was another mystery.

The minutes that passed seemed to become hours before they waned, and he listened again, but in vain, for more information from the street.

All at once he was attracted by a noise, at sound of which he turned.

A door had opened, and he felt that some one had entered the room.

"Where are you?" said a voice.

Plush Velvet started forward.

"Here I am," he answered.

A match was struck on the wall opposite him, and he saw in the blaze that shot up a little man whose left eye was sunken dreadfully.

"Are you Plush Velvet, the detective?"

"I am Porter Prince, or Plush Velvet, as they have nicknamed me."

"That is good. I am here to help you."

"To help me?"

"Yes, to get you out of this if you will accept of my assistance."

"Why shouldn't I?"

"That's a fact. But you don't seem to know me."

Plush Velvet took a better look and shook his head.

"I had two good peepers when you saw me last, but now one has left me, and I've got a nickname besides. Mebbe you know this."

The man had lit a gas-jet along the wall, and now rolled up his sleeve."

There was a tattoo mark between wrist and elbow, and at sight of it the detective gave vent to a slight cry of recognition.

"You are Yonkers Jack."

"Yes, Jack from Yonkers, and the man you had sent up for a year once. I'm going to help you. How did I find out that you were here? I've been playing a little game. Got into the house next to this one and heard 'em' fetch you here. I never thought any one would catch you napping, Plush Velvet—hang me if I could—and it nearly took my breath when I see'd 'em bring you in here."

"You saw them, did you?"

"Didn't I?" grinned the ex-convict. "Didn't I see 'em fetch you right along?"

"How many were there, Jack?"

"Two."

"And you saw their faces?"

"Not quite all of them. I saw that one was so tall and the other not quite so much so. I saw that one had thin side-whiskers that managed to get outside his mask, while the other seemed to have a mustache. They toted you in between 'em as if you was a log of wood, an' you might have been so for all the stir you made."

"When was that, Jack?"

"About three o'clock."

"Why didn't you come sooner?"

"Had to wait till the coast was clear, and then I had to plant what I had nabbed."

"I see."

"But I'm here now, and you are going out if you say so."

Willing to accept the assistance of any one who came to the rescue, Plush Velvet went with the man who had come at the eleventh hour.

The Unknown might live to repent the surrender of the ten minutes which he had granted the detective in which to prepare for death. He might curse the day that saw him relent with the man of trials and victories.

Plush Velvet saw the light of day once more and, disguised, he betook himself to his little den on the Bowery.

Some one had been there.

A searching hand had overturned different things and keen eyes had guided it.

Every drawer had been unlocked or broken into and its contents looked through.

But so far as he could see nothing had been carried off.

Once more Plush Velvet was on the streets.

The morning was well advanced when he pulled up in front of Marcus Nilson's office.

But he no longer looked like his old self. Instead of the starchy person known in many places as Plush Velvet, he looked like a simple old investor who wanted to intrust a few dollars with a man like the broker, and he found no one but Palos Midway on duty.

Midway looked as if he had just come from an appetizing breakfast and was in good humor, enjoying a cigar at the desk.

"Where might I find Mr. Nilson?" asked the detective.

"Don't know, sir."

"But you represent him, don't you?"

"I'm his head accountant; I represent him in a manner, but I don't receive investments, nor look after his patrons' business."

"You don't, eh?" drawled the supposed investor. "When does he come down?"

"When he is well, at eight o'clock, but today, being indisposed, he's not likely to show up till later."

"Then he is sick?"

Another puff and a self-important look from Palos Midway.

"I guess I speak comprehensible English," said he. "Mr. Nilson is sick, so his daughter sent me word, and I can't say when he will be able to look after your investments. You might leave your name—"

"Not in your care," snapped Plush Velvet. "You look like you were out last night and didn't get much sleep."

The clerk started as the eyes of the speaker covered him sharply; but he did not resent the accusation.

Plush Velvet strode from the building leaving the man to his cigar and vanished.

"Gladys sends word down that her father is sick, does she? He was in good health yesterday," and the ferret boarded a car and was carried up-town.

Half an hour later he rung the bell at Marcus Nilson's door.

It was opened immediately and Gladys, white-faced and trembling, faced him.

"Your father, Miss—"

"Is not at home!" cried Gladys. "He was here till half an hour ago, but he has vanished. I am going down to see if he went to the office, and if you are one of his customers—"

Plush Velvet was in the hall.

In another instant he had revealed himself to the girl.

"Come with me, then. You could not have come at a more opportune time, for there is a mystery here."

She opened a door alongside the hall and ushered the ferret into the lofty library.

"It is so mysterious that I have been shuddering, dreading the very worst," she went on. "He was here when I last saw him."

"After you sent word to the office that he was sick?"

"I sent no word to the office!" exclaimed the girl, her bright eyes dilating with wonder. "Was word of that kind sent down this morning?"

"Mr. Midway says there was."

"It is very strange. I will not say that father did not send word himself; but I did not."

"He understood it as coming from you, Miss Gladys."

The fair girl again shook her head.

"He was writing at the desk just a little while ago. He was not feeling well, but he was not much indisposed. I had been upstairs a while, not more than ten minutes, and when I came down he was gone. I never knew him to go off without kissing me goodbye. It has been his custom for years."

She stopped and looked at the empty chair and the unoccupied desk, and a sudden faintness seemed to steal over her.

"This means something terrible!" she said. "I remember the man I faced in the office, the Bowery law shark who came to father with evil intent; and, then, there is the other one, the handsomer man who wanted him to sign some papers. I overheard him talking about this while sleeping in his chair last night. It is dreadful!"

Plush Velvet began to run over the letters and papers on the desk.

Gladys, for a moment without her old display of nerve, dropped into a chair and listlessly watched him.

"Have you looked at these papers, miss?" suddenly asked the detective.

"I never thought of that."

Plush Velvet held a bit of heavy note paper in one hand while he spoke.

"Then, you don't know what, if anything, he may have left behind?"

"I do not."

"You can stand bad tidings—a sudden message, as it were?"

Gladys, suddenly cool, sprung up.

"I can stand anything!" she cried.

Plush Velvet placed the paper in her hand.

She looked at it a moment, turned white and reeled toward the wall with a sharp, painful cry.

CHAPTER XVII.

GLADYS TAKES A HAND IN THE GAME.

GLADYS NILSON had mastered the contents of the note at a glance.

It was terrible enough to startle any one.

"I can submit no longer. I have left all that is dear to me and will never return.

"MARCUS NILSON."

Plush Velvet believed that what he had found on the desk had been scribbled in a moment of terrible despondency and that the broker had not considered matters at all.

He was gone. The writing told both the detective and Gladys that he had given up, and driven to desperation by the men who were hounding him from pillar to post he had rushed from the house doubtless with the intention of seeking the river.

"They did this—those men!" cried the girl, still holding the paper in her hand. "This is the work of the fiends and from this moment I am their sworn foe."

She was strangely cool while she spoke, and her white face showed that she was being consumed with an inward fire.

"You will help me?" she suddenly went on, clutching the detective's arm. "We will hunt them down together; we will show no mercy to the conspirators who drove him to this; we will make life unbearable for each and all."

"It shall be as you say," said the ferret. "It shall be the last work of the gold cabal."

Quieting Gladys as best he could, Plush Velvet left the house of the broker and rode down-town.

The vanishing of Marcus Nilson was something for the police and the detectives.

But first of all he went direct to the office to see if by chance the missing man had turned up there since he left it.

Palos Midway was still on duty and the cigar had been replaced by a fresh one.

The clerk looked daggers at the supposed investor when he entered the office, but did not speak.

"Has Mr. Nilson come down yet?" asked Plush Velvet.

"Haven't seen him."

"You have received no further news of his condition?"

"None at all."

Midway turned again to the books and seemed to bury his nose among the pages.

Plush Velvet stepped off and looked at the man.

There was a slight tremor to his hand and he saw that now and then he was covertly watched by the sly eyes of the long-faced man.

"I've been up to the house," he said at last.

"Well, what makes you come here and ask me about Mr. Nilson if that is the case?"

"Simply because he wasn't at home."

"Gone out, eh?"

"Vanished in a fit of temporary insanity."

Palos Midway looked up and then leaned back and laughed.

"Come, sir, what do you take me for?" he exclaimed. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"It has that sort of look," replied the detective. "Marcus Nilson has vanished in a manner which alarms his daughter, Miss Gladys."

"Oh, she's nervous and thinks the worst."

"Perhaps so, but you will see that he does not turn up to-day nor to-morrow."

"And you will be demanding your money back, I suppose; will want it right off as if it wasn't safe here."

"I haven't said so."

"No, but that is the way with old fellows like you. Gone off, eh? In a fit of temporary insanity? Why, a man never had a clearer head than Marcus Nilson, and it won't do for a stranger like you to come here and stuff me with such theories. Won't do, you know."

Disgusted with the man, Plush Velvet drew back still watching him, but at the door he said:

"You will know more by and by, Mr. Midway. You will see things in another light inside of twenty-four hours, and your carriage ride last night may rise to trouble you not a little."

The pen, though well gripped, actually dropped from the accountant's hand.

He turned two colors inside of a second and looked at the supposed investor with tremulous lip.

The bolt had gone straight to the target and quivered there.

"What's that?" he cried. "Do you dare to insinuate that I was engaged in anything disreputable last night?"

"You may take my language as you please, Mr. Midway. I simply said that your late ride may rise to trouble you sometime; that's all."

With the last word on his tongue, the detective of Gotham left the office, leaving a pair of staring eyes behind him, and Palos Midway for five minutes sat on his stool like a man in a dream.

Meantime Plush Velvet was instituting inquiries for Marcus Nilson where he thought he would be apt to hear of him.

It did not seem possible that a man of his prominence and so well known to hundreds could utterly vanish and in broad daylight leaving no trail behind.

Men had vanished before him and in New York—they had disappeared never to be heard of again; but that the broker should disappear was quite another matter.

He left Miss Gladys to inform the police, as he knew she would if her father did not turn up in a short time.

If he had been driven off by threats of blackmail—if he had concluded to vanish to get beyond reach of the villains who were playing their deep, desperate game—he may have planned before in a manner which would give the police no clue to his whereabouts.

Plush Velvet went back almost to the broker's starting-point.

Some person would be likely to see him quit the house, for it did not seem possible that he could leave the dwelling without catching some one's eye.

The detective found a clue, but it was soon lost. He discovered a man who had seen the broker come down the front steps at a certain hour and walk away. This man was positive to the very minute and so on, and the detective took up the trail here.

Three hours after starting out, he found himself in a certain part of the city watching a woman who appeared to be regarding a man purchasing some fruit of an Italian.

With his fruit the man came toward her and the two met.

Plush Velvet started in pursuit the moment they walked off.

They entered a carriage that stood at the sidewalk round the corner and were driven away.

The detective followed and saw the pair alight at a house near the East River.

He sauntered into a little grocery near by and accosted a woman who waited on the counter to assist a crippled husband.

He fell into conversation with the woman and incidentally asked her who occupied the house to which he had tracked the man and woman.

"We don't know their names," said the woman. "They took the house but day before yesterday and we haven't had dealings with them yet."

"They have no children?"

"None that I've seen yet, and my own would have known it before this if they had kids."

"They come and go pretty often, don't they?"

"I don't know about that, but the old gentleman who called on them this morning seemed disappointed to find them out."

"An old gentleman, eh?"

"Yes, sir; he called about two hours ago, came in a cab and got out and went in. He didn't stay long for no one seemed at home though the house wasn't locked! But there was something funny about him and I mentioned it to my husband."

"About the caller?"

"The old man, you see. When he came he wore a long black coat and looked like a hermit; when he went off he wore a coat not

so long and a different hat, as if he had changed in the house."

"Did you see him come and go?"

"I couldn't help it, you know, as business wasn't pressing just then, and I had nothing to do but just watch the stranger."

"He went away, did he, in the same cab that brought him to the house yonder?"

"Yes. It waited for him near by and he jumped in and was whisked off in a jiffy."

Plush Velvet was reasonably sure of one thing and this was that the man he had tracked to the house with the woman was the Unknown who had conveyed him to the dark room after his capture on the sidewalk by the trap of the carriage.

Lighting a cigar and leaning against the counter while the garrulous shopkeeper talked, he kept his eyes on the house almost directly across the street.

All at once he saw one of the curtains drawn aside and a face appeared at the window.

The distance prevented him from getting a good look at the face; but it was a woman's as he could see, and he watched it till it was withdrawn and the curtain dropped again.

The woman behind the counter had seen nothing of this and the detective continued to ply her with questions calculated to stimulate her narrative powers.

He waited till the front door opened and a man came out.

This person stood a moment on the step looking carefully up and down the street, when he started off at a brisk gait.

"Is that the man who lives across the street?" asked the detective, calling the woman's attention to the man.

Mrs. Droomogle adjusted her glasses and took a long look at him before she replied.

"Did he come out of the house?" she asked.

"I think he did."

"He doesn't look like the man who generally comes and goes; but you know I won't be positive after what I saw of the old man."

Fearing that his man would escape him, Plush Velvet took after him, following him down street and keeping him constantly in sight.

It was hard to do this, for the man did not seem to fear espionage and after some time he turned into the street in which was situated Marcus Nilson's office.

Keeping on he led the detective to the very door of the building and he saw him mount the steps.

Palos Midway raised his head at sound of his visitor's steps and smiled.

The stranger passed on to the private office and Midway followed him.

The watchful ferret saw the door close behind the pair.

Ten minutes later the strange man came out and walked off.

Again he had the human cheetah at his heels.

As for Palos Midway he went back into the little private room and unlocked the safe that stood in one corner. No one saw him. He took out a little drawer inside the safe and set it on the broker's desk.

With hard-set face and long fingers he went to work, having previously locked the door, and in a little while he had the contents of the little drawer spread on the desk.

One or two things he selected and transferred to his bosom, his fingers stowing them carefully away, and when he had accomplished his purpose he returned the drawer to the safe, relocked it and looked up with an air of triumph.

Then he went back to his desk and bent over the ledgers for half an hour.

"This ends it!" said he as he shut the book and got down off the stool. "I have played the best hand I knew how, and now we will reap the harvest. He says it's all right and that we can't fail, no matter what comes. It's good by drudgery and welcome money. I will have a hold on him if he tries to go back on me and I will make use of my power—"

"Has father come down yet?"

Palos Midway started as if a thunderbolt had fallen beside him.

Gladys stood before him, her face pale and her manner startling. She was looking him in the eye and he could not avoid the accusative look.

"I haven't seen him, miss," replied Palos.

"That is, if he came down I haven't seen him about."

"But let me see the letter I sent—the one I sent announcing his illness, I mean," and she held out her hand.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM FRYING-PAN TO FIRE.

FOR once in his life at least Palos Midway seemed to lose his head.

He fell back from before the broker's daughter and looked at her in breathless wonder.

"I understand that I sent a letter down saying that father was sick and would not be able to get down to the office on time," she continued.

Midway's gaze wandered to his desk.

"Let me see the letter, Mr. Midway."

He rummaged through the things that littered the top of the desk and then turned his face blankly toward the girl.

"It must have dropped into the waste basket."

"Do you let my letters find their way thither?" asked Gladys with a smile.

"Seldom, but we had a good deal of work this morning and I think I cleared off the desk. Yes, I know I did."

"Well, you needn't look for it. You will shut up the office. Papa will not be down to-day. You will let me have the key, Mr. Midway, and I will take possession of the office."

"You, miss?"

"I will take it now," said the girl, determinedly. "Your further services are dispensed with."

Palos Midway bit his lips.

But he got down from his stool and looked toward his hat.

Gladys was immovable.

"The sooner you get out of this office the better. If you don't make haste I will call the police."

"You needn't do that, indeed, you needn't! I am going, but for the life of me I don't see what has happened to make you treat your old father's clerk thus."

"No wonderment and no apologies," said the girl. "I am mistress here from this time on. We don't care to have you about, Palos Midway. What is due you?"

"Fifty dollars."

"I have an account at the bank of my own," replied Gladys, stepping to the desk and drawing a check-book toward her. "Fifty did you say? There it is. You are no longer in the employ of Marcus Nilson, broker. Remember that, Mr. Midway."

The dismissed man stood on the threshold looking at the determined girl like a man in a maze. He could not get it all through his head; the dismissal had fallen like a meteor, and he could not believe that he was adrift on the world again.

Gladys spent no more time with him, but left him to depart without so much as a "good-morning," and turned toward her father's private room.

She heard the man slouch off and seemed glad to get rid of him, for she smiled to herself.

"Hang me if it didn't fall like a bombshell," ejaculated the clerk. "Who'd have thought that she would drop down upon me in that manner? Wasn't thinking about her; didn't know she was around till she spoke and I nearly sprung out of my skin. Dismissed! Why didn't I make it a hundred? I would have got it just as well. That's where a man loses by honesty."

He chuckled to himself as he walked off, watched, though he knew it not, by a man who kept him in sight.

Palos Midway entered a small place half a dozen squares from the broker's office and took a chair at a long desk.

There was stationery before him and he began to write.

The person who watched him dropped in also and took a chair at the other end of the writing-board.

Envelopes were scattered over the board, and when he had written his letter the clerk picked one up and addressed it.

His hands seemed just a little nervous.

"Wait a moment," said the watcher, as Palos started to quit the room. "I would like to talk with you."

Marcus Nilson's clerk turned and looked at the speaker, a man with a dark beard and well dressed.

"With me?" said Palos.

"With you," and the stranger waved his hand toward the chair which Palos had just vacated.

"Go on," said the clerk, nervously.

"You don't seem to know me, Mr. Midway?"

"Never saw you before. But you know me; at least you call me by name and—"

"I ought to know you, sir. You are Marcus Nilson's accountant."

"I am."

"You have been in his employ for, let me see—"

"Nearly three years."

"That's right. You came from the South."

"From Georgia."

"You were once situated in New Orleans."

Midway seemed to drop a little color.

"You are right," he said, with a slight cough. "I lived there once; but really I don't see what this is leading to."

"Never mind that. Did you ever know a woman there named Susette Armstrong?"

Palos seemed to fall back against the support of his chair.

"You knew her! Come, you needn't answer my question any further. Susette Armstrong. She is in New York now, isn't she?"

"I don't know."

"But you do know, Mr. Midway."

"Who are you?"

"I am one who knows something about your past up to date," was the reply. "You have seen this Susette within the last forty-eight hours."

"I—"

"Of course, yourself. You're all three in the game."

"What game?"

"How blissfully ignorant you are," laughed the stranger. "You don't know anything when it isn't to your advantage to know it. But this Susette. She is here as large as life. Served a year behind the bars, you know. Made love to the jailer's son and escaped. That same jailer's son is here, too."

"By my life, man, whoever you are, I will not submit to this questioning."

"You will do nothing else," cruelly said the man at Midway's elbow. "You will answer me or go out when I go."

"Go out where?"

The eyes that looked into his face answered him, but Palos did not speak for some time.

"You are a detective?" he exclaimed at last.

"I am, and you might as well know it now as some other time. I will proceed."

"And I will refuse to answer."

"Don't do that, Midway. It might get you into trouble."

"You want to make me betray some one. You want to transform me into a Judas and a Judas I will never be."

"That's a good resolution," smiled the other. "You have been so many things in your life that I don't think the role of Judas would injure your reputation."

Palos Midway was calculating the distance between him and the street.

"Having seen Susette within the last forty eight hours, you have also seen her friend and companion. You have seen Rufus Reek."

This was thunderbolt number two, and it fell with the same force of the first one.

"I don't know the man," protested Midway.

"You seem to forget your friends whenever necessary. You don't know Rufus Reek, eh? When did you get all those letters signed 'R. R.' now in your room?"

"You've been there, have you?"

"Yes. I've searched your room. I know the contents of those letters. You were conveniently at lunch when Rufus Reek called on Marcus Nilson last."

No reply.

"Mr. Midway, don't you think you might as well make a clean breast of the whole affair?"

"I betray no one."

"Not to save yourself, eh?"

"No!"

In another instant a hand was laid on Palos Midway's arm and the detective continued:

"Very well, then; you will get into the net. You are there now, in fact; you are in the toils of the law."

Midway drew back the length of the arm before him, but it was a scant tether.

"No words, no scene," whispered the detective. "My name is Prince."

"Plush Velvet?"

The man you and Rufus Reek carried to the old house and left under sentence of death in the dark room. You don't know how I escaped from the snare, but that need not be told just now. I am here and you have been unmoved. You are not the most guilty of the trio, Midway; but there is evidence enough to get you into unpleasant quarters. What are you going to do?"

Plush Velvet was looking straight into the clerk's eyes. What would he do?

"I will go with you. This is no place to talk," said Palos.

"You will talk in another room, will you?"

"I will."

Still holding his prisoner's wrist, Plush Velvet rose and they walked out. Once in the street with the sunlight in their faces they looked at one another and blood surged like a lava tide through Palos Midway's veins.

All at once he jerked back and felt the detective's grip tighten at the wrist.

Desperation lent him the strength of a lion.

He changed his tactics and sprung at Plush Velvet whom he forced against the front of the building and then into a window amid a shower of broken glass.

It was the mad work of an instant, and the detective in falling had his hand wrench'd loose and Midway sprung away before he could be apprehended.

Cut and bleeding the ferret was helped out of his dangerous position by some who had witnessed the assault and his wounds were dressed as speedily as possible.

Plush Velvet could not help smiling at his discomfiture. The hitherto mild Midway had suddenly shown the spirit of a tiger and the strength of one and had turned on his hunter and escaped.

"Yes, already far from the scene of his startled battle for liberty was the man who had struck the detective down. He was hurrying down the street eager to reach a certain place within a given time, and when he turned a key in a door he looked at himself in a mirror and grinned.

"I had to do it," said he. "I had to turn on him or I would have been in the net for good. How did he know I was in the hotel? When did he track me? Plush Velvet, eh? I never intended to tell him anything more than I did let out. So he knows about Susette and Rufus. Does he also know that I am dismissed and that the girl holds the brokerage fort? New York is no place for you, Palos Midway, and the sooner you get away the better."

He realized that this was very true. He began at once to make preparations looking to a speedy departure, and ten minutes later a man, who did not look the least like the long-faced clerk, came out of the house and started off.

His keen eyes looking on every side, told him that he was not seen this time. He made his way toward the ferry, and reached the boat just in time.

As he entered the little cabin and selected a seat, he caught the glance of an eye at his elbow.

"Where are you going now?" said a voice.

Palos Midway turned white.

"Come, you are running off, aren't you? I didn't intend to molest you, but if you are going to slip away to prevent telling the truth, I will hand you over to the police as soon as we land on the other side."

The fleeing villain could have dropped from his seat, for the speaker was none other than Gladys Nilson, slightly disguised.

Fleeing from the detective, he had fallen into the girl's hands.

CHAPTER XIX.

RUFUS REEK SHOWS HIS HAND.

PALOS MIDWAY, on his way to the ferry, had taken care to post a very important letter, and at the first delivery after the posting, a man tore it open.

He started a little when he read, graphically detailed, the clerk's encounter with Gladys at the office and his subsequent adventure with Plush Velvet at the hotel.

"What is the matter? You start," said a woman who had watched him while he read.

"The rat is out of the trap. He is at large, and Palos has encountered him."

"What, out of the trap you set, and you told me that from your snares there was no escape."

"I thought so, but he is out."

The woman, who was rather handsome, with a dark face and sloe-black eyes that scintillated strangely, rose and stood before the man.

"Don't you know what will happen now unless you play the final hand?" she said.

"I know."

"Then go out and play it, Rufus Reek. Do you think I will sit here in the shadow of doom and let this man-hunter turn the right stone to find under it the triumph he seeks? I would not be Susette Armstrong if I did that. You must strike this man down, no matter where found."

There was no reply for a moment, and the man twisted the letter which she had handed back to him, while his face contracted visibly.

"Are you going to do it?" she asked impatiently.

"I am."

"The next time there must be no failure."

"There will be none."

"That is good, but what has become of Palos?"

"The letter does not inform me, you know. I can't tell where he is."

"Will he come, or will he run from his shadow?"

"That depends. If the coast is clear I think he will be here."

"It was a bold thing for him to throw the detective through the window."

"I guess that was his only hope, and a desperate man, you know, will do desperate things."

"Of course; but I wonder if Palos let the ferret pump him at the hotel."

"Not much, if I have a right opinion of the man."

"Time will show that. I don't think he betrayed us."

"No, he never did that," said Rufus Reek positively. "Palos Midway may lose his head now and then, but he will not betray us. I am sure of that."

Susette Armstrong went to the window and stood a few moments among the curtains there, watched by the man who occupied the arm-chair by the table.

All at once she turned and came back to him.

"I am told that Gladys, his child, has a lover who has been in Europe half a year," she said.

"That is true."

"When is he to come back?"

"Within the next thirty days, I understand."

"And then will they become man and wife?"

"Yes."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"He is a well-to-do young fellow with a good character and good enough for her, I guess."

"That marriage must never take place!" cried Susette. "It must never be consummated."

"If it is, we lose, eh?"

"Of course, and what is more, the death of Miles Tavish will do no person any good."

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Rufus Reek's mouth.

"Look here. She is in the city. The woman who is so anxious to ferret the mystery of Grand street is a veritable thorn in our side, and if she succeeds you know what may happen."

"So do you, woman."

Their eyes met and silence for a moment fell over the pair.

"Go to work," said Susette, clutching the

man's arm. "Strike while you can. With the rat out of the trap, with Gladys looking for her lover from Europe, and with Madame Spider, alias Mrs. Tavish, on the alert, you ought to see what is to be done."

"I see it all."

"More than this: the gold-bug is in our hands. You failed to play your hand in his office because Plush Velvet came between with the menace of a six-shooter; now, don't fail again."

He laughed.

"No one talks of failure," said he. "You may be sure that I shall not repeat Miles Tavish's act and take my secrets to Katch & Pinch, the law sharks of the Bowery."

"Certainly not. That would be the act of a fool indeed. By the way, you know what took place on Bleecker street? You have seen the newspapers which give an account of the mysterious death of Sloper Pinch, one of the members of the firm?"

"I've seen it and it puzzles the police."

"What was the man doing in that house and who could have killed him?"

"I'm not interested in his death, though I have an idea that a certain man could unravel the mystery if he chose to do so. Never mind that, Susette. We won't let the death of that Bowery spider trouble us. He has spun his last web, which is good for the community. We will now proceed to play our last hand."

"The last hand. Let it be well played and successful. If you fail this time the jig is up."

He nodded and looked away.

"One word," he said to the woman as she turned to leave the room. "Would you advise me to play for the girl and her fortune?"

"Why not?" said Susette, stopping at the door. "Isn't she the real prize of the game? With the club you have—with the papers which would blight the broker's life—why should you stop now?"

"It shall be done!"

Rufus Reck crossed his legs and selected a new cigar while Susette left the room.

The handsome man knew nothing of Midway's adventure after dropping the letter into the mail box. He did not know that the absconding clerk had taken a seat near Gladys on the ferry-boat, and that at that very moment a scene somewhat exciting was occurring with his accomplice for the chief actor.

After awhile he left the house himself, and after a journey half-way across the city halted in front of a house that looked like a plain residence.

He mounted the steps and rung a bell.

The door was opened by an old man in a long coat who started the moment he saw his visitor; but when that person made a sign with his hand he was ushered into a room alongside the hall.

"Did you lock the door?" asked the old man nervously.

"Of course. I see you got here."

"Yes. I found the house without any trouble, and here I will remain till the hunt is over and I can get out of the city unobserved."

"No one would know you now. You have shaved as I directed, I see."

The old man smiled.

"Yes. I am well fixed here. But you will permit me to return to one thing ever uppermost in my mind, won't you? Who are you?"

"Your friend, as I have said," answered Rufus Reck, who no longer looked like himself. "The time has not come for me to disclose my identity, but let me say that I am one who happens to know how you are menaced and who will serve you in any way in his power."

The old man who was Marcus Nilson smiled faintly.

"I will have to wait awhile, then," he said.

"Yes, when the clouds have rolled away all will be made clear and we will get out into the sunshine again."

"And I will no longer be hunted nor have a club held over my head, and Gladys will never learn what has happened in my past."

His voice trembled a little as he spoke his daughter's name.

"Gladys will never know if you take my advice."

"I will take it in everything," was the reply. "Save me from my enemies and I will make you rich."

"Never mind that. You will be saved." Rufus Reck looked at his victim and his eyes seemed to get a sudden gleam of triumph.

"By the way," he said as he leaned toward the broker. "Is it true that Gladys has a lover in Europe?"

"It is true. He went over for his health six months ago and she looks for him back soon."

"Is he worthy of her?"

"In every way worthy," said Nilson. "The match has my approval and I am sure that Gladys loves him."

"But what if your own salvation—what if the keeping of the secret, concerned your child?"

Marcus Nilson's look became an inquisitive stare.

"Would you see the match broken to save yourself?"

It was a startling question. Marcus Nilson nearly fell from his chair.

"Do you mean would I break up the match to have the dread secret kept from Gladys and the public?"

"Plainly speaking, that is what I meant."

"I have told you that I would do anything to keep the secret back."

"Very well; then I will take you at your word. You will have to give me Gladys."

A cry which he could not keep back parted Nilson's lips.

"Give you Gladys?" he exclaimed. "Is this what you have been working for?"

"Why not?" was the response. "You don't expect me to work for no reward at all."

"But my money—"

"I want no money. You will give me the girl or the secret will be published and you will stand face to face in public with the old crime."

For a moment, white-faced and horror-stricken, Marcus Nilson seemed about to sink to the floor, watched like a hyena by the disguised scoundrel.

"It all lies with you," said Rufus Reck. "I am not altogether merciless. Already you are dead to the world. You have left home; you have vanished; but you are in the hands of friends. The secret is in my power. I know it, and what it would do to your reputation if told to the city at large. What would New York City say if she heard that you once consorted with a villain, a man whose crimes made him the most hated man in the South? What would the city say if she heard that you went to Miles Tavish's house the night he was killed, and that this same Miles Tavish was Anton Amos of the South, your old partner in crime? His death meant much to you, especially since he had transferred the story of the past to paper. You needed those papers to make the secret safe; they were worth their weight in gold to you. I say the man died that night; he died a violent death. What would the police say to this?" and Rufus Reck took from his pocket one-half of a gold ring which he thrust forward. "Have you the other piece, Marcus Nilson?"

There was no reply. The broker sat bolt upright in the chair, and his eyes appeared about to fly from his head.

"I have leaped from the fire into the furnace!" he groaned. "I see it now."

"You have simply fallen into the hands of one who will save you if you are sensible. You can save yourself."

"By swearing that Gladys shall become your wife?"

"Yes."

Nilson rose and tottered across the room. His face was terribly drawn.

"Better exposure—better death than sell the girl in this infamous manner!"

"Just as you like," laughed the man behind him.

Then the room seemed filled with a wailing cry, and the figure of the cornered broker reeled forward and dropped a lifeless mass on the carpet.

CHAPTER XX.

WOLF MEETS WOLF.

It was a strange compact, that made by Madame Spider and Custer Katch the lawyer.

The woman had intercepted the Bowery shark in his flight from New York and had

secured from him his consent to an alliance which seemed to open new opportunities to the man of rascality and crime.

Mrs. Tavish cared little for the death of the man she had formerly acknowledged as her husband; she had no love for him, for, like him, she was an adventurous woman, a viper of the day, and she saw that she might turn his tragic death to account and filch by some means from well lined pockets money enough to live upon and keep up a certain style that captivated her.

As for Custer Katch, hoping that the death of his partner would never be traced to him and this hope increased when he learned that the police had as yet found no clue, he was ready to embark in a career of new rascality, and this is why he consented to assist Madame Spider in her cherished schemes.

Katch had resolved to go back to the old office to mourn as sincerely as he could the death of his partner and to keep up appearances on the Bowery while he and Madame Spider played out the mutual hand they had picked up.

Crime as well as misery sometimes loves company, and these two serpents mated very well.

Neither had conscience, and both knew the past history of the other.

Custer Katch, sitting in his little office shortly after the compact, was surprised to see walk into the room a man who looked to him like a detective.

While he had never had much dealing with the detectives as a class, something told him that this man was one.

He was rather small of stature, red-faced and well-dressed and recalled Saul Dogan the counterfeit Jerseyman.

As the little man took a seat he looked at Katch and then drawled:

"Lost your partner, eh?"

Custer Katch said that he had been so unfortunate as to lose the honest and helpful Sloper Pinch than whom there was no brighter lawyer on certain lines in the city.

"I hear so," said the visitor. "I am a lawyer myself."

"Ah?"

"Yes, my name is Duces Teekum, have been in practice about twenty years and know how to deal with men and things."

"Then, you ought to be assured of a living."

"Am. I can make my living anywhere. But I don't like to practice alone."

"There are no shares then," observed Katch.

"True, but it's lonely like. Don't you want a new partner?"

"Not now."

"Some other time, eh?"

"I am thinking seriously of abandoning the practice of law. The death of my partner has broken me all up. I am rattled."

"I would suppose so. He met his death by a bullet I am told. Shot 'by some one unknown to the jury'."

Katch nodded.

"Sudden death. It is always sudden to be killed outright. I don't know of anything sadder."

Mr. Teekum was looking across the table like a hawk and the Bowery sharp could not avoid his gaze.

"I thought I would like to become connected with a firm so well and favorably known in certain fields," he continued.

"You would find Duces Teekum pulling with you in harness. He knows all the crooks and turns in law, all the twists and foils of practice, and, what is more, it would be to your advantage just now to take me in."

"Why so just now?" asked Katch.

"Because I would be able to help you some. You see I am a man of wit and will. I have lived in New York fifteen years and I know how the wind blows. I have been living on Bleecker street and I happen to know some things which as yet are not public property."

The lawyer felt his blood get hot at his finger-tips.

There was the shadow of a threat here, the semblance of a future exposure.

"I am sorry, Brother Teekum, but, as I have said, I haven't decided to take a partner just now."

"Oh, well, I guess I'll have to shift awhile longer alone. I can go back to the old den

on Bleecker and pocket a fee now and then as usual. I'm sorry, too, Mr. Katch. If I could make you understand how beneficial the proposed partnership would be to you, you wouldn't hesitate a minute, I am sure. You see that coroner's jury didn't pry very deep into the affair of Pinch's death. It didn't summon the right witnesses—"

"What do you mean?" almost roared Custer Katch, bending forward and meeting the threatening gaze of the man across the table. "You don't insinuate that I know anything about it, do you?"

"You're a lawyer, Mr. Katch. You have the knack of 'catching on' whether things are spoken or implied. I merely said that that jury didn't summon the right witnesses; that's all."

"But you intimate by such language that I know something of my partner's death—something as yet not divulged."

"Did I?" meekly asked Duces Teckum.

"You certainly did, and I resent such words."

Mr. Teckum picked up his hat and looked over it at Custer Katch.

"I live at No. — Bleecker," was all he said..

The Bowery spider started.

It was the next door to the house in which he had set a trap for Plush Velvet and in which Sloper Pinch died.

"I was at home the other night."

"What do I care if you were?"

"Oh, I don't suppose you care where I was, but, as I have said, that jury might have summoned some one else."

"You?"

"Perhaps."

"And you would have dragged me into the controversy."

"I would have told the truth."

"According to your notion of it."

"That is your idea of it, I suppose."

"You would have smirched me, and yet you come and want to be admitted to a partnership with me. You know where the door is, sir."

Mr. Teckum did not stir.

"The door, I say, is right behind you," continued Katch.

"I'm aware of that."

"You will find your way out of this office."

"When I am your partner, but not before."

Custer Katch was amazed. He had never seen such audacity in all his life.

Nothing like it had ever occurred anywhere.

"I don't want a partner, I tell you," he went on. "When I want one you may be informed."

"You need one now."

"Which means if I don't take you in right away you will give me trouble?"

"Exactly."

"Don't you know that such a partnership would not be congenial?"

"What do I care for that?"

"Not much, I expect. Where are you from, Mr. Teckum?"

"I came from Kentucky."

"Do they do business down there in this way?"

"I can't say that they do, but they transact some mighty peculiar business in Kentucky."

"Well, you beat the old Harry. You are determined to get in here."

"That's what I'm here for," grinned Duces Teckum.

Custer Katch looked again at the man glued as it were in the chair he occupied, then he said:

"Come to-morrow. Give me time to think this over."

"Now or never!"

"Drop in again, say, in the course of an hour."

"I will remain here till I am a member of the new firm."

Custer Katch bit his lip for there was but one way out of the dilemma.

"You know how to draw up a partnership," continued Teckum. "You have paper before you. Go to work."

The Bowery lawyer looked at the documents on the table and mechanically cleared the way for work."

"Make it brief and plain. Let the firm be

Katch & Teckum. It will sound pretty well, rather musical you know."

"But remember that my partner is still unburied—"

"Oh, the new partnership needn't be published till next week."

Custer Katch began to write, and in a few minutes he had written out the usual articles of partnership.

He was watched all the time like a hawk by the man on the other side of the table, and when he looked up from the paper he saw those keen eyes regarding him.

At last, he pushed his work forward for inspection and Duces Teckum leaned forward and inspected it.

Then Custer Katch saw a red line about the man's neck. It seemed to extend all the way round.

"That's what I wanted. Now sign it."

Katch did so, and then the new partner affixed his strange name to the document.

"I'll drop in now and then during the next few days, and after a week's time I'll be here altogether."

Teckum rose and stood at the edge of the table looking down at Custer Katch with a queer expression on his face.

"I trust the new firm will prosper. You will see to a new lettering of the sign on the door. See that the artist gets my first name right. They don't know, all of them don't, how to spell 'Duces.' It's a name my father gave me and he was a lawyer in Kentucky. Good-day, Mr. Katch. My specialty is criminal cases in which partners are interested," and with this parting shot Duces Teckum shut the door, leaving the Bowery shark to stare at the portal and curse the visit which had thrown a shadow over his career.

"What does that villain know?" he cried, springing up and striking the table with his fist. "Where was he when it happened? And does he expect to gain anything by forcing upon me a partnership which shall be the price of his silence?"

"You fool, have a little sense," said a voice at the door, and just then it opened and the red face of Duces Teckum appeared there. "I am trying to save you from the gallows. I've been there myself; don't you see the collar I wear?" and he touched the crimson mark on his neck.

Custer Katch said nothing. He could only look and flinch.

"If you want to live and fleece people, you will keep your head and not lose it over a little bit of business like ours. I know what the jury did not bring out, and what I know is enough to hang you."

It was a relief to Custer Katch when the door shut again and when he heard his evil genius on the stair

CHAPTER XXI

FOXES HAVE EARS.

OATH-BOUND as she was, Collie Cormorant, the little dressmaker, did not like the situation. She wanted to tell Plush Velvet all about her imprisonment in the house inhabited by the woman who had acted as her jailer, but she feared the consequences.

She feared to remain longer in the house on Grand street which had been the scene of Miles Tavish's tragic death, and so she began to cast about for other quarters.

She applied to the detective to help her in her hunt, and in a day she was accommodated in another street, where she hoped to find rest from the worry she had had over the mystery since the night of the fatal twenty-second.]

She did not know that Plush Velvet had come to the conclusion that Miss Cormorant had fallen into Rufus Reck's hands, but this was true.

The Bowery ferret, picking up a thread here and there, had reached this conclusion after some time spent in careful investigation.

More than this: he had never told any one of a certain find made in Miles Tavish's room the night of the crime, or rather, early the next morning.

Besides the bit of Marcus Nilson's ring, which seemed to tell him that the broker had been there, he had picked up a charm which he knew could not have belonged to the broker.

After his encounter with Palos Midway, in which he (the detective) had fared rather

roughly, he turned his attention again to the man who now appeared so prominently on the stage—Rufus Reck.

He was content to let Palos Midway go for the present.

Fortunately for him, Plush Velvet escaped the consequences of the broken window, for his few wounds were soon dressed, and in a little while he was on the trail again.

The vanishment of Marcus Nilson was at first a puzzle to him, but he soon came to the conclusion that the man was still in the city, and that he had not taken his own life, nor even thought of doing so.

Gladys's dismissal of Palos Midway was known to him, and he rather indorsed the girl's action, though he would have preferred to have had the rascal retained.

In short, from what the grocery woman had told him about the old man going to and coming from the house to which he had tracked Rufus Reck and Susette Armstrong, he believed that Marcus Nilson had only fallen into the hands of his very worst enemies, and that they had surrounded him with a spell which would prove dangerous if permitted to be worked very long.

To discover the new retreat of the broker, and to get at the bottom of the Grand street murder as soon as possible, was the detective's wish.

Susette Armstrong was to be watched, for Plush Velvet felt that she was a fugitive in the game not to be ignored.

He therefore set a vigil on the house opposite the little grocery which he patronized without exciting Mrs. Droomgoggle's suspicions, and at nine the first night he saw a veiled figure come down the steps.

The woman looked all around before she started off and the detective followed at once.

Susette was fleet of foot and extremely cautious.

Midway might put an ocean between him and the man-hunters of New York; he would not be turned aside now that he had found Susette and that she was on the streets under the lamps of New York with him at her heels.

Susette declined a carriage and did not think the street cars worthy of patronage.

She led the detective a good many squares until she stopped in front of a house which she did not enter.

Plush Velvet saw that she passed very close to the door and he noticed a swift movement of the hand toward the lower part of it.

Following on he saw protruding from the crevice at the foot of the door a bit of paper and his hand drew it out as he passed by.

It proved to be a message.

"I will be back by midnight. Make the play between now and then, even if you have to strike him down at home." S."

Such was the find made by the ferret underneath the door.

Susette was still in sight and Plush Velvet after reading the note resumed his trail.

"Back by midnight?" said he. "I will see where you go to now, Susette."

Susette turned into a street and the next moment ran up the front steps of a house which was Palos Midway's old home.

She did not ring, as if she knew that the door was always left open for the clerk and vanished.

Five minutes later there was a light in Palos's room.

Susette was seated at the clerk's table writing on a few sheets of blank paper which she found there, and the detective who had stationed himself in the neighborhood was watching the windows.

Why not face the woman in the upper room?

Why not go over and let this woman know that the cords were drawing tight on her, that he felt that she was in the secret of Miles Tavish's death?

Plush Velvet believed in coups.

More than once he had won by them and why should he fail this time?

He crossed the street and slipped into the house.

The stairway was carpeted, and no one could hear him ascend to the room above.

A light beyond the keyhole told him that Susette was still at work.

He was in the upper hall when the door below opened and some one came in.

"I wonder who's in my room?" said a voice as the new-comer mounted the steps.

Plush Velvet knew the voice. It was Palos Midway's.

Up the stairs came the speaker and Plush Velvet fell back into a dark corner.

Palos slipped to the door and applied one eye to the keyhole then rose suddenly and opened the portal.

"So you've come to see me?" cried the man.

By the light that for a moment streamed from the room without revealing him, Plush Velvet saw the half-turned figure of Susette as she faced Midway.

"Where have you been?" laughed the woman. "I have been here some time, took possession of the place and thought it was quiet enough to do a little writing in."

"So it is," Palos took a chair. "Where is Rufus?"

"At work, you may be sure. We got your letter. You must have shown the ferret a trick?"

"I did. I had to do something and I threw him into the window."

"And left the man there?"

"Certainly. It wasn't for me to go and pull him out. Not I. The glass might have finished him."

"Not such good luck as that," said the woman. "We don't get rid of our enemies that easy. Rufus will set his trap now."

"For the ferret?"

"Yes."

"Well, it will have to be better than the old one. He got out of that you know."

"True. You should have killed him at the end of the ten minutes and it is unfortunate that you were merciful."

"I told Rufus so, but he thought the last trap would do the business."

"First traps should kill. Second ones will not do all the time."

The door had been shut by this time and the detective was listening intently. The voices came to him without much trouble.

"What about the gold-bug?" asked Palos after a brief silence.

"He is safe."

"They say he's vanished."

"So he has."

Gladys says 'temporary insanity,' or something of the kind; but I know."

"It was a bold play. It was the only one to be made," said Susette. "The old spell that worked in the South knows no section. Oh, the bird is safe now."

"Where?" eagerly inquired Palos.

"Let that be Rufus's secret. Let him play out that hand, as he knows how to play it."

"Will he play it out? Will he see that the gold bird sheds his plumage?"

"You can trust Rufus."

"I will trust him. But you know that I got my walking papers, eh?"

"From the office?"

"Yes, delivered by the girl."

"Gladys?"

"Yes; she was as cool as she could be. I never saw her like. She paid me off and showed me the door."

"What did you do?"

"Got up and dusted."

"But you did not come home?"

"Only for a time. I left again. I guess I will go again."

"Out of the city?"

"Yes, for a time."

"You shall not go. We need you," said Susette. "You shall remain till we have triumphed. Look here, Palos. See what I have written."

"What are you going to do with that?"

"Make it a weapon. Make it a dagger or a club just as I think best."

"I don't know how it would work. He is as cool-headed as he can be and nervy, if a rascal."

"But I know him. I know that he had the papers in his hands before his partner was killed. I know that he blackmailed Marcus Nilson to the tune of two thousand dollars—"

"And you expect to blackmail him?"

"I can try if we need money. The old money-sucker is rich for a shark like Custer Katch bleeds all who come within reach."

"I know that, but the idea of your bleeding him!" and Palos Midway laughed.

"I will try it. I will show you what a

woman can do when she has the right sort of weapons. It is pretty hard to bleed an icicle, I know that; but this one might yield a few drops."

"Try it if you think so. But you will find Custer Katch a foeman worthy of your steel."

The door opened now and Plush Velvet returned to the corner which protected him.

"Which way?" asked Palos.

"I'm going home. Will you remain in the city?"

"I will stay. I was caught awhile ago on the ferry and came back resolved to fight it out."

"That is right. The coward runs, the brave man remains. Palos, we win or fall together."

"I shall stay, lose or win."

"Then, look out for the one man we have to fear. Watch the ferret who is at work. He knows you; he more than suspects you; he will not let you escape if he can."

"I know that. Tell Rufus Reck to look out also. Tell him that the threads are being picked up one by one by this indefatigable ferret of New York."

"How do you know this?"

"Ask me not how I know it, but it is true. No matter into what side trails our little game may lead Plush Velvet, he never loses sight of the murder in Grand street."

"I will post Rufus; but really it will not be needed for the coil has been twisted and the fox is in its shadow."

"I wish that I could believe that, Susette."

"Believe it when I tell you that it is true. The days of the trail fox are nearly ended. He has picked up his last clue and the Grand street episode will be the last one set down to his credit. It winds up the career of a man who, it is said, has never failed to unravel the skein of mystery."

"I trust all this is true. I know what Rufus is, but he failed once and with this same man."

"No failure now, Palos, doubter. Good-night," and the door was shut.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE STOLEN DOCUMENTS.

THE ferret of Gotham knew that once more he had Palos Midway in his clutches.

He heard Susette pass down the stairway and quit the house, leaving him at liberty to open the door and stand face to face once more with the broker's clerk.

He heard Palos bustling about in the room for a while and then everything grew still.

He moved to the door and listened, hearing nothing and concluded that Palos had resolved to sleep over the events of the last few hours.

Recalling the note which Susette had left underneath the door he believed that another trap had been set for him by Rufus Reck and that it would be sprung before midnight if the man could find him.

Plush Velvet did not try the door, but left Palos to his slumbers, as if he were enjoying such, and stole from the premises.

He had set out to find what had become of Marcus Nilson and this was still uppermost in his mind.

We have seen what became of the missing broker; we have seen him fall with a cry at the feet of Rufus Reck who placed before him the terrible alternative of surrendering his daughter or being exposed.

Let us go back to this pair.

It was some time before the broker recovered in the man's presence and when he came to he was watched by Rufus Reck whose face wore a flush of triumph.

He evidently believed that he had scored his point for when the broker caught sight of him he started and said:

"Is there no other way out of this?"

"None," answered the man coolly. "There is but one avenue of escape and I have shown that to you."

"You will take Gladys and save me, or lose her and wreck my life and hers?"

"That is it precisely. I leave you to decide now."

"Will you give me no time? won't you let me think till to-morrow?"

"I can't. I want your ultimatum now, Mr. Nilson."

Marcus Nilson groaned, but no reply came forth.

"It all lies with you," continued the finished rascal. "You know where I found half of your ring and you will not deny that you were there that night."

"I was there, but my hand did not kill."

"Could you prove that satisfactorily to a court of justice? Could you make the police believe that, being that man's hater, you went to his house for a purpose and did not kill him? There were signs of a struggle, and in a struggle you would naturally break a ring."

Marcus Nilson saw all with a shudder. He saw that the web of guilt could be made to catch him whether he was guilty or not. The thought was a terrible one.

"You may have searched the room."

"I did not. I went there for a purpose—to save myself and Gladys, but not at the expense of a human life."

"That is your story; but where is the witness?"

"We were alone."

"I thought so. You went alone and came away by yourself."

"I did."

"Yet you tell me that you are innocent—that you did not struggle with him—"

"I do not say that," interrupted the broker. "I am going to be truthful. I came in collision with Miles Tavish so-called; but I left him alive."

"Oh, you encountered him, then; you had a trial of strength with your foe?"

"I did."

"And must have broken your ring there. Where is the other piece?"

Marcus Nilson did not speak. He knew where it was; he had seen it in Plush Velvet's possession, but it was safe with the detective.

"Where is the other piece?" repeated Rufus Reck.

"It is not in your hands, thank Heaven!" cried the broker. "It is where it is safe and you will never place the two pieces together to be used against me."

The villain smiled.

"One piece will be enough," said he. "This little bit will tighten the rope unless you come to my terms."

The broker rose and came toward the man in the chair near the table.

Rufus Reck watched him and thought he saw in the deep-set eyes of Nilson a madness which he could not control.

"I won't give Gladys to you. Do your worst!" said Nilson.

"Ha, you refuse to accede to my reasonable demands, do you? You spurn the lease of life and happiness which I have extended?"

"Yes, I spurn every offer you make."

"That is all right. Now wait till the bomb bursts."

Rufus Reck walked to the door which he opened looking back at the broker with the eyes of a tiger.

"The blow won't be delayed very long. You can't escape it, no matter what you do," he said in a quiet way which betrayed the very essence of coolness with which his nature seemed saturated. "You can remain here or go out; it will be all the same. Suit yourself, Marcus Nilson. You have decided and you will take the consequences."

He passed from the room, shutting the door quietly behind him, but not locking it.

The broker stood for a minute in the middle of the room, clutching the table and trying to master his emotions.

Not a word passed his lips; but that his soul was deeply stirred was evidenced by the blood that trickled over his chin.

At last he went to the table and sat down. He found writing materials at his disposal, and in another moment he was at work. He wrote nearly an hour, covering sheet after sheet with nervous lines and laying each one aside when finished.

When he got through he gathered up the sheets and read them over.

The clock struck twelve.

Marcus Nilson seemed satisfied with his work, for he folded the papers and placed them in his bosom, buttoning his coat securely over them.

"I can deal a death-blow in dying. I can

let him know that I have a parent's heart, and that I have about me the consciousness of innocence which no one can take from me.'

He found his way to the street unguarded, as if Rufus Reck had left it so on purpose, and with another look around the room, he walked into the hall and out upon the sidewalk.

No one seemed in sight, and drawing his hat over his brow like a man far less innocent than himself, the broker glided off, flitting underneath the lamps like a belated specter.

Marcus Nilson did not betake himself to that part of the city where his house was, but turned toward the river and brought up in front of a place which he had seen before.

Mounting a flight of steps which led into a building from the pavement, he reached a door which he did not try.

Everything was quiet beyond the portal, and a moment later the broker drew the documents from their hiding-place and slipped them underneath the door.

"He will find them and he will act. I have made this human bloodhound my executor and avenger; I know that he will not fail to carry out my last wishes. I know of no one else to whom I could go and I am satisfied."

He satisfied himself that the papers had been thrust into the room before he withdrew and then he crept down the steps to the street below.

As he left the door, a figure came from the dark part of the corner and stopped where the broker had stood.

This figure stooped and a slender hand was slipped under the door. After some time the documents were dragged from the room and had passed into the possession of a man who had abstracted them.

He concealed them and passed from the building, and a square from the spot, in the back room of a little drinking-den, he drew them forth into the light and began to read.

"It is the last desperate move of Marcus Nilson, the broker," said the man as he finished. "He would strike me a death-blow in dying, and so he writes out his confession and what passed between us and carries it to Plush Velvet, the ferret. This is the last card in the deck for the broker. I see through his game, and I will see, too, that what he has written never reaches the detective."

The speaker laughed over his find, and went out.

He did not care what had become of Marcus Nilson. The man who had refused the offer he had made—who had refused to give up his child in order to save himself from exposure—might have gone to the river, but what of that? Gladys still remained and she would be without a protector now. Perhaps this thought made this man glad; perhaps he thought of this as he flitted underneath the lights of New York, passing from street to street with what he had fished from beneath Plush Velvet's door in his possession.

He brought up at last in a house where he threw himself into a chair and made noise enough to awaken the inhabitants of the house, if it had any.

Footfalls came down the staircase and he saw the door open. Susette Armstrong stood before him.

"Back, are you?" cried the woman, when she saw the man in the parlor. "It is past midnight. Did you have to wait for him all this time?"

"Wait for whom, Susette?"

"The rat condemned to die in the trap."

"Oh, the detective, you mean? I haven't seen him."

Susette started.

"But you got the note I thrust under the door, didn't you?"

"I got no note."

"But it was gone when I came home."

"I didn't find it."

The woman lost color.

"What if he found it? What if he followed me and pulled it from beneath the door?"

"You should have taken better care."

"I did not think that I was followed, but if you didn't find the note some one stole it."

Rufus Reck shook his head.

"Let it go," he said. "See here," and

he threw what Marcus Nilson had written upon the table.

Susette picked it up and read in silence.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Oh, he went away."

"But these papers?"

"I pulled them from beneath the detective's door."

"It was a lucky find. Did you follow Marcus Nilson to the ferret's?"

"No, I was on hand when he came."

"Setting a trap for Plush Velvet?"

"Yes, but he did not come to it."

"It is not too late yet!" cried Susette.

"See, it is not near day. You have at least two hours yet—two hours for action. Are you going to let this man escape?"

"I am not."

"Then, go back and strike."

Rufus Reck coolly crossed his legs and regarded Susette in silence for a moment.

"I am a little tired," said he. "I will wait a few hours. He won't escape us. With the papers written by Marcus Nilson in our hands, we can afford to rest awhile. To-morrow night—"

"May be too late! You don't know this man."

"I know him well enough. I will wait. If you care to finish him, woman, you know where the trail is."

Susette said nothing, but looked at Rufus Reck wondering, as her expression showed, if he was only taunting her, or whether he was really sure of trapping the Bowery shadow-sport the next night.

As for herself she believed that delay was dangerous.

"Just as you think best," she said to him at last. "I would strike him now. I wouldn't sleep till I had put an end to this man's trials; for with him successful we fail, and fail forever."

CHAPTER XXIII.

A NERVOUS TRIGGER.

THERE was one thing which greatly troubled Custer Katch, the Bowery shark, and that was the partnership which he had been forced to draw up between himself and Duces Teekum.

He had never heard of the man before, but he had learned that he (Katch) was not the only man who could hold a club over another's head, for the one which Mr. Teekum held seemed quite formidable enough to accomplish its purpose.

The bare thought that Teekum lived next door to the house in which Pinch died, was startling enough to take the law shark's breath, and when he recovered to some extent after the new partnership, he felt that he was in the clutches of a villain as great as himself.

Once more he thought of flight to save himself, but on second thought he resolved to remain and "fight it out," as he bravely characterized the situation.

It was a long day for Custer Katch. It was Pinch's funeral day, too, and he attended the burial, riding in the foremost carriage as chief and only mourner, for none of Sloper Pinch's clients thought of paying any respect to the remains of the man who had fleeced them.

It was after the return from the funeral, and Katch was about to enter the building which contained his den, when he was accosted by some one at his elbow.

He looked around and saw Duces Teekum at his side.

The little man's face was as red as ever, and his eyes had that same devil-may-care twinkle which seemed to render them dangerous.

"Have been waiting for you," said Teekum. "Back from the funeral, eh?"

"Yes."

"Don't go up-stairs just now. I can talk here," and he pulled Katch into the hall, where he turned upon him again.

"I want some money, not much, just enough for present needs. Say forty dollars."

Custer Katch was disposed to resent the loan, but Duces Teekum leaned forward and continued:

"You won't lose anything by it. I was living in the house next door, you know."

This decided the law shark, and he drew

his pocketbook. In another moment he counted out the amount, upon which the long fingers of Mr. Teekum closed with avidity.

"That's blackmail," thought Custer. "It is the very worst kind of blackmail, and why did I let that scoundrel bleed me?"

Yes, why?"

He saw Duces Teekum move off and maddened at sight of his money going off with him, he bolted after him, but not with the intention of stopping the accomplished thief.

He kept the little bleeder in sight and tracked him to a place where he vanished.

"It is all a hoax that he lived on Bleecker street," said Katch to himself. "That was only a story coined to get the best of me and I won't let him do it. If I submit he will come again and again and the partnership will become intolerable. I will stop it now."

Night had fallen by this time, but the lamps had not been lighted. In a short time their light would fall across the stones of New York and he would be seen by some one.

Katch dodged down the alley and brought up in front of the house to which he had tracked Duces Teekum.

The very door was before him and he saw that it was not public enough to boast of a number.

After awhile he rapped, but no one came to open to him.

He tried his knuckles again and then the portal was opened and the law shark of the Bowery looked into the face of a girl of ten who regarded him with a smile.

"The gentleman who came in awhile ago," said Custer Katch.

"I don't know him, sir. Aren't you at the wrong door?"

"Indeed, I am not. Tell him that his friend is at the door—the gentleman of the Bowery, and now, little one, make haste for I am in a hurry."

"We have no man in the house. We live alone, mother and I, and mother is out just now."

"His name is Teekum, and I want to see him. You needn't be afraid to call him."

"But you must be mistaken. There is no man in the house."

Custer Katch was disposed to bite his lips through; he looked again at the girl and then pushed his way into the semi-lighted room behind the little one.

"Now," said he with an air of triumph, "tell him to come here."

The little black eyes seemed to flash. The child planted herself firmly in the middle of the room and regarded the lawyer with a coolness which did not belong to her years.

"Won't you summon him?" demanded Katch.

"I won't, there! If you think he is in this house look for him. It won't take you long for this is no Fifth Avenue Hotel."

Determined to find the man who had fleeced him, Custer Katch crossed the room and opened the nearest door.

"That's our bed-room," said the child.

"What do I care?" growled the lawyer.

"You gave me liberty to search the house and by Jove—"

"That's right, look in every hole and corner," interrupted the child. "I don't care."

Katch looked through the room which he entered, but found nothing which rewarded him.

"He came in here," he said, coming back to the child. "I saw him open the door."

There was no reply.

Just then the front door opened and a woman entered.

She stopped the moment she saw Custer Katch.

"Who is this man, Milly?" she said, looking at the child.

"I don't know? He puts on all the authority of a perliceman and he's been searching the house."

"This man has? What does he want?"

"He says he saw a man come in a while ago."

The woman was a dark-faced, raw-boned creature of forty, and her very mien was enough to make the lawyer quail.

"What's your name?" and she came toward Custer Katch with clinched hands.

"Never mind that," was the reply. "I am simply seeking a friend with whom I

have business; but if he didn't come in here, why, I'm willing to apologize and get out."

"Get out without the apology," said the woman.

Katch stood not upon the order of his going, but left the house, leaning toward the door with listening ears when he saw it shut at his back.

If he could have seen through the door he might have started, for he had hardly left the place ere a trap was lifted in the floor and the head of Duces Teckum appeared.

"Where is he?" asked the red-faced man.

"Oh, he's gone now, but he wanted to see you badly."

"Of course he did. Must have changed his mind. But, see here. I guess this is what he wanted," and the speaker produced the roll of bills, at sight of which the woman and the child uttered exclamations.

"I thought so," said Custer Katch, who heard a man's voice beyond the door. "I knew he was concealed somewhere in that house, but I don't go back."

Duces Teckum took a chair and looked at the pair before him.

"How much of it do you want now?" he said, counting the money.

"Give me a ten."

"All right. I have the clamps on that rogue, and he is in the toils deep and sure. I'm his partner. That part of it was only a diversion intended to show him that I know something. He went to the funeral to-day, went to it with a handkerchief pressed to his face, the villain; but that's his style," and the man laughed.

"Now I am going to swoop down on the other one," he went on. "I am not Duces Teckum to her, but I am enough to make her shell out. It's not wrong to bleed a vulture, eh, Nina?"

"Of course not."

Duces Teckum remained a while longer in the house in the alley, and when he took his departure he was habited in another garb which quite altered his appearance, and he betook himself down the street to turn up some distance from the scene of his escape from his infuriated new partner.

"Good-night," he said to the woman who opened the door whose bell he had rung. "You are Mrs. Tavish, the widow of the late Miles Tavish. My name is Link O'Bane. I knew your husband and I have a clue to his death."

He was stared at, but was admitted to the parlor.

There Duces Teckum sat down and put his hat on the floor.

"It was quite tragic, mum."

"Do you mean my husband's death?"

"Of course. It was as sudden as a death can be I guess and I don't like sudden deaths, speaking from experience."

Madame Spider who had been eying the man closely smiled a little, but made no reply.

What made her watch him so? Did she see anything familiar about her visitor?

"I have some very private business to transact with you. Now, if you are not alone—and pardon me, I heard a noise just now in the hall which—"

He did not get to finish the sentence, for the door opened quickly and the man turned to see before him the figure of Custer Katch.

He sprung up and faced the law shark of the Bowery.

"This is the man," said Katch, with a glance at the woman. "This is Duces Teckum so-called."

"Well, what of it?" snapped Link O'Bane.

"It means that your game ends right here," and from beneath the lawyer's coat came a revolver which was cocked as it covered the astonished Teckum.

"Sit down," said Katch.

Duces Teckum with a look that meant that he had nerve when forced to the wall refused to obey.

"You know something—too much," continued Custer Katch. "You are playing the game of the blackmailer; you are trying to rob me for your own purse. This man is the secret keeper who must keep what he knows forever."

Madame Spider came forward.

"Look at his neck," she cried. "See the red streak around it."

"That's my neck-tie," grinned Duces Teckum.

"This man has been in the hands of the hangman once," she went on. "The red streak proves it."

"You are right. I have been pulled up once. I have felt the noose that tightens, and the ring around my neck confirms your accusation. Your husband, madame, was once saved by me. I know all about him and about your past. I know why he was killed and why that man yonder took me into partnership. I know, too, who killed Miles Tavish. I can set the ferrets on the right trail beyond the shadow of a doubt; but with that revolver looking me in the face like a kodak do you think I feel like telling all I know right here?"

"It is false! It is another of his games!" cried Custer Katch. "This man the depository of so many secrets? Nonsense! But for all this he knows too much—too much to live."

Madame Spider was inclined to be merciless, too.

"Shall I kill him?" asked Katch.

The woman seemed to hesitate, but her heart said death.

"If he escapes this time he will go on until he makes us a good deal of trouble. He must die where he is."

"All right," coolly said Duces Teckum. "You have me in the trap and it is all your way. I am the rat and you are the jaws of the steeler. Do what you please."

Custer Katch looked at the cool head and lowered the revolver.

"If you will take an oath and sign—"

"I sign nothing."

"If you will promise—"

"I promise nothing in this house. You will kill me or else I will walk out a free man."

Katch's hand got nervous at the trigger, and all at once the room was filled with a stunning report and a man sprung out of the chair and tumbled headlong toward the wall.

Perhaps he had finished Duces Teckum.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE FRIEND IN NEED.

MARCUS NILSON, hoping that the documents which he had thrust underneath the detective's door would soon fall into his hands, pursued his way through the maze of Gotham's streets.

At last he had defied Rufus Reek and was fleeing from the clutches of that thorough-paced rascal.

The half-crazed broker believed that the ferret would prove his avenger, no matter what became of him, and so he went on and on, until he found himself in a part of the city which he seldom visited.

It was a strange place for a man of Marcus Nilson's prominence to visit, but he was there, as if to hide till he could come out once more into the sunlight and stand face to face with the world again.

He knocked at a door after looking at a bit of crumpled paper which he took from his pocket and after some delay the portal was opened.

The half-disguised broker went in, but turned in the narrow hall and looked at the person who had admitted him.

"You don't know me?" said he.

"I am sure I do not," was the reply, and the man looked at him curiously in the little light that prevailed.

"You don't remember Lorain, eh?"

There was a start and a hand which was thrust out was grasped by the broker's.

The two men stood in speechless silence for a moment.

"Lorain? I haven't seen you since—"

"There, that will do. We won't recall the past just now. I am here and am going to throw myself on your mercy."

"That's right. Come on in. I am alone. I live quite alone here, and you shall share with me till I have nothing left for us."

The speaker led the way to a small room back and turned on the broker with an inquisitive look.

"I needn't keep anything from you, Maxwell, for you would have served me when I was in trouble years and years ago, and I never expected to call on you for help."

"Neither did I ever expect to see you here. Do you live in New York?"

"Yes."

"How long have you been here?"

"Oh, a good many years."

"And I haven't known it till now? It is strange, but, then, I never go out much. So you need help, Lorain? I am your friend through thick and thin."

"I thought you would be, Maxwell, and, in truth, I did not know where else to go. I have kept sight of you, for I accidentally saw you some years ago, but had no occasion to meet you till now."

The man whom the broker addressed looked at him all the while with almost overpowering curiosity, but he did not venture to ask him what his present trouble was.

"I am here to hide," said the broker after a pause.

"Not for the old affair?"

"Partially so. I am here to throw myself on your generosity, Maxwell, for I must hide till my avenger gets to work, for I have placed one on the track, and with what I left with him to-night he will be able to strike. You have no visitors, eh?"

"Only one and he is true."

"Who is that one, Maxwell?"

"A queer little man with a red face whom we call Duces Teckum. He comes now and then for a chat, for we were acquainted years ago, and I like to have him call."

"Do I know the man?"

"Of course you don't. He is a lawyer who has had a hovel some where on Bleecker street, and he gets odd jobs in the police courts where I believe he fleeces all he can, for he comes in now and then with a handful of wool."

"I don't know whether I would like to see this man or not. I have been bothered with these fleecers; they have been the bane of my life of late, and but for them I would not be here imploring you to hide me for a while."

"Oh," said Maxwell with a smile, "I don't think you need fear this odd caller of mine. He drops in at intervals and there's no telling when he's due."

Marcus Nilson heaved a sigh of relief.

Maxwell pressed closer to him and took a long look.

"You've changed a good deal," said he. "To me you are still Paul Lorain who was drawn into that unfortunate affair by Anton Amos. But that scamp has met his dues, as you may know, for some hand found him in his lodgings on Grand street and finished him. I believe the mystery has given the police a good deal of trouble, and I notice by the newspapers that they haven't got to the bottom of that murder yet."

The hunted broker said nothing for a full minute.

"Did you know that he was in the city?" he asked at last.

"I had discovered it a few weeks before the murder, but I did not let him know that I was here also. Miles Tavish he called himself, you know, and in that name he buried the old one, under which he won such an unenviable reputation in another section of the land. In the South where he flourished and where he dragged you into the mire, Lorain, he was another man; but here, after years of crime, he tried to hide and kept out of the clutches of the law."

"Just so, Maxwell, but, as you say, some enemy found him and put him out of the way."

"I have thought that I might give the police a clue to Tavish's death, but, then, you see, I don't want to come forth and be mixed up in anything of the kind. I have had enough in my time and they don't drag me into any muddle connected with the police."

Marcus Nilson seemed to lean forward with eagerness.

"Wouldn't you tell if it would help me?" he asked.

"Would it help you just now?"

"It would. It would help to arm the man I have made my avenger. I would pay you back ten-fold for your trouble. What do you know?"

"Not much that they might call tangible," was the reply. "You see I have a diffidence in coming out and getting mixed up in anything of the sort; but if it will help my old friend Paul Lorain I will come out even though it exposes my past which is none of the best and places me in a light not calculated to get me many new friends."

"Do you mean to tell me that you know who might have killed Miles Tavish?"

"Who might have killed him? That is right! I do not say that I know who did it, for I didn't see the deed done; but you see I know who might have done it, though I never intended to say a word about it for reasons which I have just advanced."

Maxwell stood leaning against a table with his arms folded while he addressed Marcus Nilson, and the broker, now scarcely breathing, was drinking in every word with the greatest eagerness.

He was waiting for the man to go on.

"I happened to be out on the night of the twenty-second," continued Maxwell. "I was on Grand street and this is a part of the secret which I have kept from the police."

"You will recollect, Paul, that I remained in the South for some years after your vanishment, that I remained there looking after my father's estate which took nearly all my time for at least five years. One by one those with whom I was acquainted left the region and came North or went in other directions. Among these was a man whom I had reason to remember.

"We called him the White Dandy, though that was but a nickname which seemed to fit him very well."

"This man I saw on Grand street on the night of the twenty-second and at an unseasonable hour.

"In fact, I almost ran against him as he came out of a house which I afterward was horrified to learn was the one occupied in part by Miles Tavish. You may believe that the confrontation startled me for I was until then unaware that this man was in the city at all, for I had not been in the habit of going out much.

"So sure was I at the time that I stood face to face with the White Dandy, I narrowly escaped calling him by his old name; but we did not collide and he passed on."

"What time was it?" asked the broker.

"It was past midnight."

"Be sure of that, Maxwell?"

"It was a little past twelve by my watch," continued Maxwell. "I am sure of the time. The White Dandy came out of that house and pulled his hat over his brow, but not until I had looked into his face and recognized him."

"And what did you do?"

"I followed him out of curiosity."

"Well?"

"He led me a long chase, but the longer it grew the greater became my curiosity, and I resolved to track him to the end of the city but what I found where he nested."

"And you found out?"

"I made a discovery which gave me another start."

"What was that, Maxwell?"

Marcus Nilson seemed cool enough now. He was seated in an old arm-chair which must have done duty for some time in a second-hand store, and was watching every movement of Maxwell's face.

"I tracked the White Dandy to a house into which he let himself by a latch-key, and by sneaking up to the window like a common spy and eavesdropper, I witnessed a meeting between him and—Whom do you think, Paul?"

Marcus Nilson shook his head.

"Your memory is good. I am sure of that," said Maxwell with a smile. "You have treasured in your mind all the events of your past life in the South?"

"Not an event have I forgotten."

"You remember Susette Parsons?"

The woman who came forward and testified against me that day which was the darkest of my life and which established my connection with Anton Amos, or Miles Tavish?" cried the broker.

"Yes. That woman met the White Dandy in that house. I saw her from the window and though she has changed some, she is still the dark-eyed woman who would have sent you up for life that day if she could."

Marcus Nilson writhed his lips and clinched his hands.

"The blow shall fall on that woman's head," he suddenly cried. "This will arm my avenger anew; this will give the ferret a clue which he shall follow till the mystery has been made clear and the guilty punished."

Why, Maxwell, they would make out that I killed Miles Tavish."

"You? You had reason to turn on that man and choke the life out of him. Of all men, you were the one to strike him down and take vengeance; but I don't believe you did it."

Nilson raised his arm, as if to swear that he was innocent, but dropped it as suddenly and fell back in the chair with a deep-drawn sigh.

"So, she is here too—that viper who stung me in court and who blackened my reputation, making it so dark that I shunned the light of day."

"She is here in New York and the friend of the White Dandy."

"But this man—this person whom you have so nick-named? He must have come forward after I left the South."

"He did, but he knows all the woman knows. That they must be playing a desperate hand is apparent from his visit to Miles Tavish's house that night."

"Yes, yes. Plush Velvet shall know it. In addition to what I have left him he shall have this testimony. The detective shall be armed with your evidence, Maxwell, and I will wait to see the blow fall."

Nilson stood erect with his figure trembling with excitement while Maxwell watched him with a strange interest.

In another moment some one was heard at the door and as Nilson sprung across the room with a face suddenly white, the portal opened and a laugh was heard.

"I'm an early bird," cried the man who came in. "I am so early that I surprise myself, but then you know, Maxwell, I haven't any regular hour. I've had a time, have been shot at, with the revolver but three inches from my face and—"

Just then he saw Marcus Nilson.

"By Jove! who's this, Maxwell?" he cried. "You haven't been taking in a boarder?"

"Oh, this is an old friend of mine, Duces," he said.

CHAPTER XXV.

EXIT MR. PALOS MIDWAY.

THE theft of the papers left underneath the detective's door by Marcus Nilson prevented that worthy from getting a peep at something of a startling nature.

Plush Velvet, eager to discover what had become of the missing broker, was on the trail after his encounter with both Susette and Palos Midway the clerk in the latter's lodgings.

The hand of Rufus Reck, always ready to appropriate anything which promised to aid him in any way, had been too sharp for the broker, and he, as we have seen, had pounced, eagle-like, upon the papers and carried them off before the ferret could find them.

Those papers it found would have given the detective the very information he wanted; they would have told him that the broker intended to seek an asylum in the house of one who had been his friend years before, though they did not tell the name of that friend.

Plush Velvet, still a marked man despite his escape from the trap which Rufus Reck had sprung upon him, came home just too late to find anything underneath his door.

The little room revealed nothing for him, and he sat down to put together a few links which while vague and shadowy were better than none at all.

Morning came with the detective still at work, and the long beams of light that came into his room fell across the floor and brightened the place.

He was aroused by a rapping at the door and when he opened it he stood face to face with Miss Gladys Nilson.

The broker's daughter was flurried and pale, showing that she had passed a sleepless night and came in with a little start as she looked at the Bowery ferret.

"I am an early caller?" said she with an attempt at a smile. "I have slept but little, and I am somewhat unstrung, but I could not wait another minute."

"What is it, miss?" asked the detective.

"I have had a severe journey and some singular adventures," was the reply. "I

suppose I had best go back to the beginning and tell you all from my dismissal of the rascal who has played serpent in our office for months, to my adventures in the lower part of the city. Did you know that I had dismissed Palos Midway?"

"I had made that discovery," replied the detective.

"Did it interfere with any of your arrangements?" asked Gladys quickly.

"Not much. I might not have advised you to turn him off had I been consulted, but since it is done I will approve of it and let it pass at that."

"I am glad of that, but I could not face the fellow with his insolent air and let him retain his situation. He will never again fill the chair he has filled so long while playing traitor to our best interests. He made an attempt to get away—to leave the city, but I happened to intercept him on the ferry-boat and drove him back to cover. It was very funny," smiled Gladys. "Palos Midway had not expected to see me on the boat and when he looked around and found me seated at his elbow he lost his head."

"I threatened to arrest him when we got to Jersey City if he made an attempt to leave it, and he took the first boat back to New York. The man is a coward at heart, and I saw it at once. But I will come to the other adventure."

"The one in New York, miss?"

"Yes, the affair after my encounter with the long-faced scoundrel who played all this time against father, being in league, as I am sure, with those who are our enemies."

"I did not remain in Jersey City very long, but hastened back to New York. It was dark when I stepped from the ferry and I looked around for a cab in which to be carried home.

"There stood leaning against a post a man who seemed to be watching me. I discovered this from the first and when I walked away I was confident that this man was at my heels.

"So sure was I of this evidence that I barely looked around, and had my suspicions confirmed."

Gladys Nilson paused a moment and then proceeded.

"The faster I walked the faster followed Rufus behind me, and when I had reached a point some three squares from the ferry, he had almost caught up with me.

"By this time I was sure that I had seen this man before, for I had taken a good look at him and seemed to recall a visit to father's office one day just as he was quitting it.

"In another moment he was alongside, and as I looked up into his face he said:

"'You are Miss Gladys Nilson? Are you going home?'

"I told him that I was not going home, intending to get away away from him by a stratagem, when he bent forward and continued:

"'Did you find everything in shipshape over in Jersey?'

"Now, I was startled to think that this man should know the secret of my mission to New Jersey, and I fear I betrayed myself with a little cry. But this did not in the least illustrate him, for his hand suddenly seized my wrist and he said:

"'You see I know everything, and I want to say here that your father will remain missing so long as you don't listen to reason.'

"This was something I did not understand, and I was about to ask him for an explanation, when he broke away and vanished.

"I looked after him for the brief second in which I saw his fleeing figure, and then I was on the street alone with the adventure tingling my nerves.

"I was molested no more, but a moment later I procured a cab and went home."

Plush Velvet listened to Gladys's story with the semblance of a smile at his lips.

"What was the man like?" he asked. "You say that you have seen him before on the occasion of one of your visits to your father's office? Was he then dressed in the garb of a customer?"

"He was well dressed then, and he was handsome. I remember his large dark eyes, and the black mustache that completely covered his mouth."

"Dressed in dark brown clothes, miss?"

"You are right. Have you seen him?" Plush Velvet did not give the broker's daughter a direct answer; but he knew that she had encountered Rufus Reck near the ferry.

"I went over to Jersey to try and get a clue to my father," continued Gladys. "I do not believe that he has committed suicide, despite the tenor of the note which we found on his desk. Father had a client over there whom he sometimes secretly visited, and happening to know that person's address, I went over to see if he had not taken refuge there. But he had not, and I came back clueless, only to encounter this man in New York, who seemed to guess my mission across the river."

After the young girl's departure Plush Velvet went down to breakfast.

Gladys went home.

Plush Velvet turned up in another part of the city and stopped rather suddenly as a man came out of a house in the middle of a square and walked off.

"Just in time," said the detective to himself. "He is an early bird and quite alone."

The person he had seen was our old acquaintance Rufus Reck, easily recognized by the city ferret, and in another moment he was seeing in which direction the man of mystery was likely to lead him.

As the morning advanced Rufus took a breakfast in a cozy place where he could read the paper between bites, and all the time he was regarded by one very much interested in him.

The detective saw him come out and turn the first corner where he seemed to vanish.

"Oh, I beg pardon," said a man as he ran against Plush Velvet, throwing him back a moment and then stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to apologize.

It was but a momentary episode, but it seemed to balk the ferret, for when he looked again Rufus Reck again that man had vanished.

Whether the collision was intentional or not, it did not in breaking the trail, and Plush Velvet sought out the person who had encountered him, he saw him walking slowly along with a cigar gnawed in his teeth.

In a second he was at that man's side and as he passed him he threw one look back.

What did he see?

Whose eyes were those, and whose long face was but partly concealed by a false beard?

Ay, whose but Palos Midway's?

Plush Velvet walked on, nor looked back until near the first corner when he saw that Midway had turned and was walking like mad in an opposite direction.

The collision was not accidental but intentional, with the design of rescuing Rufus Reck from the hands of the ferret, and as the man of trails walked toward Palos he seemed to increase his gait till it almost became a run.

It would never do for Plush Velvet to lose the man now for he wanted to overhaul him and let him know that he was still amenable to justice; but he seemed on the eve of outstripping him.

Palos Midway saw that he was pursued, that the tracker had turned upon him and was advancing with all speed with a view of getting him once more in his grasp.

The broker's ex-clerk turned suddenly and plunged across the street.

He looked back at the man at his heels and then plunged on as some one shouted to him from the seat of a wagon to 'look out' or be knocked down.

The latter was almost unavoidable, though the man on the seat tried to hold back the horses almost at the clerk's side, and the following moment Palos Midway spun half-way around and went down under the hoofs of the team.

Several people sprung forward at the same time to prevent the accident, but neither was quick enough, and as the horses were at last thrust back by the policeman who threw himself before him just too late, some one seized Palos and pulled him away.

But the team had done its work, for the man's head was frightfully cut and gashed by the corks of the iron shoes, and the clerk was carried to the sidewalk while a crowd gathered in the twinkling of an eye, blockading the pavement in a minute.

"That was quick work," said a man who elbowed himself out of the crowd and addressed those on the outer rim.

"Is the man dead?"

"Dead as a smelt! Why, the corks of the shoes went through his skull like an egg-shell and he never knew what hurt him, sir."

Just then the body of the clerk was carried from the crowd and Plush Velvet got a look at the face.

The false whiskers had fallen off and the gaunt face which he knew so well was a mass of blood.

It did not take long to get a patrol-wagon to the scene and the lifeless form was lifted into it.

"To the Morgue," said the officer who clambered up after the body.

"That settles it," remarked a bystander. "From the street to the Morgue within five minutes!"

Plush Velvet sprung forward and into the wagon as it started.

He spoke to the officer in charge and was recognized.

"Who is the man?" asked the officer in charge of the patrol-wagon.

"One in whom I am somewhat interested," was the reply. "We will call him Palos Midway. I will see that he is well placed, for he has been a man of some prominence in certain quarters."

Arrived at the Morgue, the body of the dead man was lifted from the wagon and carried inside.

The examination was brief but thorough, the iron corks had surely done their work and the long-faced clerk was out of the game.

Plush Velvet looked over the papers which were found on the dead man's clothes, and one little one, small enough to conceal in his hand, he closed on, and a moment later turned away with a smile at his lips.

"It's better thus than a prison-cell at the end of the play," said he to himself. "I now know where the game is and almost how and when to close in on the guilty."

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOES IN AMBUSH.

DUCES TECKUM by his sudden appearance at Maxwell's house, proclaimed his escape from the revolver which Custer Katch presented to his head in Madame Spider's house.

The nervous hand of the Bowery lawyer had saved the man who had forced upon him the distasteful partnership and Mr. Teckum was left to pursue his own, if he cared to.

As for Marcus Nilson, when he stood face to face with Maxwell's visor, he feared that detection and exposure had come, but Maxwell quieted him.

Duces Teckum, who was as bold as they make them, seeing at once that he was being kept between the two men, looked at Maxwell and grinned.

"I don't know this gentleman," said he, "but if he is your friend, Maxwell, it's all right."

"My friend he is," was the response, "and it is our duty, Duces, to see that he is protected in this house."

The little eyes that fairly gleamed over the red cheeks of Mr. Teckum seemed to look the broker through and through.

"It seems to me that I've seen him somewhere, but no difference," he exclaimed. "I'll keep the secret, Maxwell; but I would like to talk to you a moment."

Maxwell and his visitor withdrew to an adjoining room and as soon as the door was shut Teckum seized the arm of his friend:

"I know the man out there," he said. "It's all right, Maxwell. You can trust Duces Teckum, but by Jove! I'd like to tell him something."

"You can't do that. He must not know that you suspect."

"No? What is he doing here?"

"I am protecting him."

"But he's run off. He has left home and his daughter is nearly wild."

"We know that."

Duces Teckum folded his arms and looked at Maxwell a moment.

"They'll have the whole city looking for him by and by," he said. "They will put the case into the hands of the police, too."

Do I understand you to intimate that the man out there is hiding from an enemy?"

"He is."

Teckum elevated his head and gave a long whistle.

"I see through it all. I put this and that together; I go back to my own late adventures and I begin to get at some things."

"At what things, Duces?"

"I fell into the hands of two sharks awhile ago, one male and one female shark. They are in collusion and the male one fired a revolver into my face; but thanks to his shaky hand, he missed me by a hair. You don't know Custer Katch, do you?"

Maxwell shook his head.

"What is he?" he asked.

"Lawyer and shark, more shark than lawyer," was the reply. "He is my partner just now, but I guess we won't practice in the same courts as he is apt to hold out at Sing Sing before long, while I prefer to carry on business here in New York. His last partner went out riding the other day and hasn't got back yet. Was killed, I mean; shot from a stair landing, fell dead in the hall and no one has yet accused the man who killed him."

Duces Teckum was standing before Maxwell with his thumbs in the arm-holes of his dingy waistcoat and a picture of ludicrousness.

"But your guest out there," he went on, nodding his head toward the door. "I know him, I say. 'He's in the toils; he has been blackmailed by my partner, but I never got a cent of the proceeds. See here; I guess you can trust me, Maxwell; but I would just like to say a word to him."

"That would tell him that you knew him."

"Of course, but I guess it wouldn't shock him too bad since you have assured him that he is safe here."

Maxwell thought a moment.

"Go and talk to him," he said. "Tell him what you please, but don't excite him too much."

Teckum moved toward the door and appeared suddenly in the room where Nilson had waited.

The broker had moved his chair near the window and was looking out into the narrow street beyond the house.

He did not hear Duces Teckum approaching.

The little man came forward and the first intimation he had of his presence was his hand laid lightly upon his shoulder. The broker gave a quick start and looked up.

"Don't let me scare you. I'm only human," said Duces as he seemed to bend down till his chin nearly touched the hunted man. "I want to assure you that we will make all things even before long."

"We?" echoed the broker.

"Yes, me and the detective you've hired." Nilson's look became a blank stare.

"Do you—"

He paused and then smiled.

No, he could not believe that the little man with the red face was in any way connected with Plush Velvet, the ferret.

"No," sniped Teckum, "I am not connected with the detective force; I never had anything to do with them. But by Jove! I'd like to give this man of mine a clue."

"You would?"

"Wouldn't I, though?"

The black beady eyes twinkled.

"But that is not what I wanted to say to you. I know you. When I came in I thought I had seen you, though you've never been my client. Of course you haven't. I'm a partner of Custer Katch, late of the firm of Katch & Pinch; and didn't they catch and pinch 'em, though, when they got a chance?"

"Do you know that rascal?" cried the broker, his mind going back to the Bowery shark's blackmailing scheme.

"Don't I, though? He's a bad one, Mr.—beg pardon, Maxwell says he don't want your name mentioned here as some one may be at the key-hole. Therefore, I'll be circumspect. Of course he's a bad one. But I want to say that the woman who is now the widow of the late Miles Tavish—calls herself Madame Spider sometimes—is in league with Mr. Katch."

"That woman is?" cried the broker.

"She is and a pretty pair they make, too, don't they? She's it with him and if they

get a chance at you they'll make the fur fly figuratively speaking."

The broker made no reply, but his face clouded and he turned his head away.

"Now, by the way, who is your ferret friend?" asked the little lawyer.

Marcus Nilson gave Teckum a look full of hesitation, if not suspicion.

"Oh, you needn't tell me if you don't care to," continued Duces Teckum. "Maxwell will vouch for me, I guess; but, then, if you don't care to give your ferret away, why, keep the secret."

"The matter is in the hands of Porter Prince, or Plush Velvet as he has been nicknamed."

"I thought so from what I've seen and heard," exclaimed Teckum. "Plush Velvet, eh? Well, he's a good one; but if the plot is carried out you'll need another man before long."

"What do you mean?"

"They've got it in for that man. He's in their way."

"Of course he is."

"And they mean to see that he doesn't remain there till the millennium comes," whistled Duces Teckum. "He may be shrewd, but the sharpest detective has been picked up by people a little bit sharper than he. One diamond will outcut another sometimes, you know."

"That is true."

"I guess that's all," and Duces Teckum fell back and dropped his arms at his sides. "I'll keep the secret; Maxwell and I are friends, and I want to get even in a manner with certain people myself."

Before the broker could frame another sentence the red face had vanished and Maxwell entered from the adjoining room.

"He's a queer little man—one who has odd ways; but to his friends he's as true as steel," said Maxwell. "I won't recommend Duces Teckum in some things, but when it comes to sticking up for those who are my friends he can be depended on."

Meantime the red face was on the streets and Teckum, his face still showing marks of Custer Katch's powder, was pushing along in his bustling manner toward another part of the city.

He went back to his den and opened the door.

It was not the cleanliest place on earth and the effects of the fire which had recently destroyed the next building were apparent everywhere in the water-soaked ceiling and the littered floor.

Duces Teckum sat down at the desk in the middle of the room and unlocked a drawer.

The morning was not far advanced and the room was not very well lighted. Still it was good enough for him.

He drew out a book which he opened and then turned the leaves slowly. His nose, as red as his cheeks, seemed to run back and forth over the pages, and for half an hour he remained buried in the heart of the old book.

"I've got the dates and now I'll go and see if he's in," he cried, suddenly shutting the book and locking it up in the drawer again. "I'll give him what I've got."

Out and down he went and once more he was on the street.

Those who saw him bustling along sometimes stopped and smiled at his movements, but thought nothing wrong about the little man—that is, those who did not know him.

Duces Teckum made his way to the Bowery.

He turned into that well known thoroughfare not far from the office of Katch & Pinch, and smiled when his eyes caught sight of the building.

He passed on till he came to another building better looking and more pretentious.

It was near Broadway, and, in a certain sense, in a more aristocratic neighborhood.

Into this building Duces Teckum passed and ran up a flight of steps.

"Hope I'll find the weasel at home," said he to himself amid his puffs. "Don't like to climb stairs for nothing. He may be in at this hour."

He passed down the hall above to a door at which he paused. If he had never been there before, he seemed to know just where lived the man he sought, for the little tin sign at the door above the name of a person

well known far beyond the walls of the building.

Duces Teckum knocked, and in response to his summons a voice was heard bidding him come in.

He opened the door at once and entered.

At first he saw no one in the room, which was not very well lighted, but the moment he closed the door a man stepped from one corner, and Mr. Teckum lost his breath as he looked into the muzzle of a six shooter.

If a thunderbolt had dropped through the ceiling and landed at the little man's feet, his surprise would not have been more complete.

The effect upon him was magical. He stopped and stammered that he was on a peaceful errand, and that he was totally unarmed, and therefore unable to cope with the man with the revolver.

"What is your name?" asked the statuesque man who confronted Mr. Teckum. "You needn't make any apologies. I am doing business in this office just now, and you will please give an account of yourself."

"But you aren't Plush Velvet?"

The other smiled, but the weapon was not dropped a hair.

"I am not Plush Velvet," was the reply. "Never mind who I am. Who are you?"

"I am Duces Teckum. I do business—"

"Oh, Teckum, the little law shark on Bleeker street? Well, Mr. Teckum, your presence isn't desired here just now. You know where the door is."

"You needn't remind me of that," retorted the little red face, and the next moment, without more ado, Mr. Teckum cleared the door and was going down the steps beyond.

"From trigger to trigger. I don't like that a little bit," he gasped. "In Satan's name who was that man, with the coolness of a lion and the smile of an arch fiend?"

He did not stop until he was half a block from the building, and then he paused and looked back as if he expected to see the man of nerve and coolness at his side.

Certain he was that he had not seen Plush Velvet the detective; but to find a man of the nature of the person he had just encountered in the ferret's room was something in the nature of a shock.

Who was he? And what was he doing there?—lying in wait for the prince of spotters?—waiting in ambush to kill the detective the moment he should open his door?

It looked that way to Duces Teckum.

The more he thought of it the surer he became that such was the case, and he did not know what to do.

At one time he thought of informing the police; but at last he went back, determined to watch the doorway of the building and post Plush Velvet of the man in ambush the moment he put in an appearance.

But then he suddenly thought that he didn't even know Plush Velvet on sight.

Duces Teckum was in a quandary.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE JEZEBELS IN THE GAME.

PLUSH VELVET, with the document found on the body of Palos Midway so suddenly hurried into eternity in the street, went back from the Morgue to a place where he could give the paper his attention.

The detective was very anxious to see what fate had thrown into his net and he sought out a place where he would be secure while he examined it.

It was a small sheet of paper well written over in the clerkly hand affected by Marcus Nilson's late employee and the ferret was soon mastering its contents.

What he had found so carefully folded and laid away in the inside pocket of the dead man was a private memorandum.

It went back a few months in the writer's life and gave the date of his first meeting with Rufus Reck, and then told how he had been drawn into the net of the rascal, at last becoming a member of what Midway called the Gold Trio.

This was a new name for the league which had been organized to get at Marcus Nilson's money, but the detective was ready to own that it was a shrewd way.

When Plush Velvet had read the paper he put it away and rose.

He had found a clue which he had wanted a long time; he knew more about Rufus Reck than all his hunting had netted him;

he had discovered something about Susette and now he knew that the pair had conspired together not only to get the broker's wealth, but they wanted to get at the secret which Miles Tavish carried so long in his bosom.

Thus armed Plush Velvet left the place where he had looked at the paper, and before long he stood once more in his own little office.

Meantime the man who had driven Palos Midway into the snare sat in a small apartment in another part of the city looking at a woman who wrote at a table.

She looked up at last and pushed her work aside.

"You don't appear to trap him very flat?" she said.

"You must have a little patience" was the reply couched in irritable tones.

"Don't you know that every hour lost now is dangerous—that we can't afford to let this man remain out of the trap?"

"I know that."

"And you know, too, that there are others who may interfere with our work in a way that may give us trouble."

"You mean Madame Spider, don't you?"

"Yes, the woman who was once the wife of Miles Tavish. She is in the city and is ready to play out the hand she holds. This woman is quite dangerous in a certain sense and we must not overlook that fact."

"I agree with you, but the ferret first."

"Of course. Mona Tavish can wait till we get ready to strike in her direction, if you will turn this woman over to me."

"Take her," said Rufus Reck, with a wave of the hand. "You can take her and play your game whenever you please; but let me tell you one thing: she is not easily over-reached."

"Granted; but you forget what I am."

"I forget nothing. I know that you are capable of taking care of yourself, but I only reminded you that this widow is really dangerous."

Susette smiled disdainfully and for a moment looked away.

"When will you look after her?" asked Rufus.

"I can see her at any time. Would it be wise to do so before we have trapped the detective?"

"I hardly know. She might need watching before then, and if you could keep her in sight while I play out the hand I believe I now hold it might be well."

"It shall be done. I know where she lives. I have tracked Madame Spider home, and it would be no trick at all for me to see her whenever I care to do so."

Rufus Reck said no more but shortly after went out, leaving Susette to herself.

He was soon followed by Susette herself.

Half an hour later a woman wearing a darkish veil halted on the steps of a well-to-do house and rung the bell.

The door was almost immediately opened and she walked in to be shown to a room alongside the hall and to be told that she would be seen in a few moments.

In the room the caller did not throw back her veil, but left it in place while she waited for the lady of the house.

Susette who had thus boldly invaded the retreat of Madame Spider watched the door with eyes that seemed to shine through the veil and when it opened she caught eager sight of the figure that came in without noise.

Madame Spider stood before her visitor with calm face and deep, watchful eyes.

She started slightly when she noticed that her caller was still veiled, but in a moment she was as calm as before.

"You are Mrs. Tavish, I believe?" said Susette.

"I have a right to that unfortunate name," was the reply. "You will pardon me, I trust, if I say that you are an entire stranger to me and if I request you to remove your veil."

The hand of Susette seemed to hesitate half way to her face, but she lifted the veil and let Madame Spider see the white face that confronted her.

"I do not know you," said Mona. "I cannot tell to whom I am indebted for this call."

Susette seemed to smile.

"I am here to say that I am anxious to

see the body who slew your husband brought to justice."

"Indeed! I thank you for the interest you take in the matter; I too, am anxious to see him pay the penalty of guilt, but we will not need more help than we have at present."

"You are on the trail, then?"

"We are on the trail!" said Mona quickly. "We intend to stick there until we have the wretch in our clutches, then the law of vengeance will be carried out to the letter and the debt of blood paid."

She was looking straight at Susette while she spoke and the face of Rufus Reck's friend appeared to flush.

"I trust you have employed a keen man-hunter in the case, for the affair was so mysterious that it will take acumen to sift it to the bottom and discover the guilty hand."

"We employ no man-hunter. We don't deal with those fellows. I am man-hunter enough myself."

"But you must remember that these men who make it a business of ferreting out crime—"

"I know too much about them already!" broke in Mona. "Pardon me, but you cannot tell me anything about these men who pick up threads of guilt where we common people would see nothing. If you came here to advise me to turn to one of these human bloodhounds for assistance, your mission has already failed."

Susette protested that she had not called for that purpose, and she again told Mona that she had simply called to offer her sympathy and to extend any aid she might be able to give.

All the time she was taking in the appointments of the room which Madame Spider occupied.

It was neatly furnished and if Mona had funds at her disposal she did not display any ostentation in the make-up of her room.

"I would like to ask you if you know a man named Reck?" said Mona suddenly.

Susette gave a quick start and turned her face toward the window.

The question had fallen like a bomb from a clear sky.

When she turned again toward Mona she found the dark eyes of that determined woman and Custer Katch's new fellow-conspirator fastened upon her.

"Rufus Reck?" she repeated, getting second wind. "Is he a friend of yours?"

"A friend of mine? He would be a strange friend were he mine. I can't call him friend, but I asked if you knew the man."

Susette shook her head.

"I can't say that I have ever seen him."

"I did not know," said Mona, with the shadow of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

"Where does this man live?"

"In the city, perhaps."

"Is he in any way connected with the matter which you have in hand, the discovery of the man who slew your husband?"

"He is!" and the figure of Mona Tavish seemed to lean suddenly toward her visitor. "This man is connected with the murderer!"

It was a hard, cold word and it fell from the speaker's lips with an emphasis which made it colder than ever.

"You don't accuse him—"

"Stay! I haven't said anything about accusation," broke in Mona. "You are saying that just now. This man, Rufus Reck, may be a friend of yours; I don't know."

"But I have just assured you that I do not know the man."

"Very well. I know him. I know more about him than even he dreams of. I am not playing a hand in the dark; I know where all the cards are and which ones to play at certain times."

"That gives you a great advantage."

"It does and one which will be used."

"I am glad of that. It will enable you to reach your revenge the sooner."

"And without failure," was the reply.

Susette began to grow uneasy. She did not like the way in which things were drifting, and she wanted to get beyond that house and its inmates. She had already had enough of the woman upon whom she had called and she had news for Rufus Reck.

In another moment she rose to go and Mona came toward her with watchful eyes.

"I'm glad you've called, Susette," she said.

Susette fell back from before the gleaming eyes and appeared to totter toward the door.

"Susette?" she cried, repeating her own name.

"Yes, Susette! You see that I am not ignorant of the identity of my caller," continued Mona. "I say I am glad you have called, for I have had the pleasure of telling you to your face that I intend to reach the end of the trail despite the man-hunters and red hands that intervene."

Susette felt her color come and go underneath Mona's look.

She stood at the door, looking at the cool woman in the middle of the room, and wondering if she did not intend to spring at her with the fury of a tigress and throttle her in that very room.

"You may have made a mistake as to who I am," ventured Susette, but the uplifted hand of Mona Tavish checked her.

"I have made no mistake. I simply know," was the response. "I have seen you before. You must not think that, with you in the play, I, one of the actors, would not know you. That would be underrating my mission. I know you and I know with whom you are connected at this minute."

"You are full of accusations now."

"Why shouldn't I be?" cried Mona. "Why shouldn't I tell you these things? Nothing can escape me. I am here to bring the guilty to justice and the ferret now on the trail shall not wrench victory from my hands!"

Susette waited to hear no more.

She threw back her gloved hand and opened the door.

"You know me now," said Mona. "You have seen the widow of the man who died in Grand street on that night of crime. You have called to find out what I look like and how I live. You have seen. We understand one another, Susette! You can go back to your friend now."

There was no reply. Susette, with the burning eyes of Mona Tavish fastened upon her, backed from the room and shut the door ere she left the steps.

The moment she was alone, Madame Spider sprang across the room and opened another door.

"She is gone. You heard everything. Now go out and track her down. Don't lose sight of her until you have landed your fish. Now, go."

She pushed toward the front door the man who had emerged from the adjoining room, and Custer Katch, with a look at the determined face of Madame Spider, vanished, to take up the trail of the woman who had come from Rufus Reck for a purpose.

The law shark of the Bowery felt that Madame Spider was more than an ordinary creature.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

RUFUS RECK SCORES A—FAILURE.

The vigil of Duces Teekum in front of Plush Velvet's den was without results.

No one came or went and after an hour's watch the red face withdrew.

If he had gone directly back to the building after quitting it he might have seen a man emerge from it and walk rapidly away.

While this person did not look much like the one whom he confronted in the detective's room it was the same man, and if Mr. Teekum had followed him he would have seen him enter another building where he vanished.

Rufus Reck had again failed to put Plush Velvet out of the way; his bold play to take possession of his office and make an ambush of it had failed for the reason that the ferret did not come, but instead Duces Teekum made his appearance to block the game of watch and wait, which was to end with a deadly coup for the man of nerve.

As yet Rufus Reck knew nothing of the accident which had deprived him of Palos Midway's assistance. Perhaps if he had known it he would have made his way to the Morgue and by representing himself as the dead man's friend, have secured a look at whatever papers Palos had on his person at the time of his death.

Rufus now resolved to make another move

and one which he fondly believed would be a coup worth playing.

His meeting with Gladys Nilson on her way back from Jersey City had only whetted his desire to carry out a design which he had for some time cherished.

He resolved to visit the young girl at home and to this end he prepared at once for this bold and somewhat dangerous play.

Gladys had returned home and was resting after her exciting trip across the river.

The broker's daughter had not given up hopes of finding her father who she believed was still in the city and had not taken his life as he intimated in the note found on his desk.

She felt with Plush Velvet that the broker was the victim of blackmailers who were holding over his head a dread secret of some kind; but she did not dream that that secret was in any way connected with the murder of Miles Tavish.

Rufus Reck, dressed for the occasion, presented himself at the door of the Nilson home and was admitted.

Stepping into the sumptuously-furnished parlor, he awaited with some impatience the coming of the fair young girl against whom he was to play the deep hand of the polished villain.

He waited five, ten, fifteen minutes; no one came.

The White Dandy walked the room and watched the door with eager eyes.

Once or twice he was tempted to call the maid who had admitted him, but he changed his mind and waited on.

All at once the door was opened and the maid herself appeared.

"Miss Gladys, I discover, is out," said Marie.

"Out?" cried Rufus Reck, color mounting to his temples and an inward oath almost following the exclamation. "I thought you assured me that she was up-stairs and would be down soon."

"I thought she was, sir," answered the girl with spirit; "but I find now that she is not in the house."

Rufus was inclined to be disbelieving and stubborn.

"I shall remain here till your mistress comes in," he said.

Marie looked at him and half closed the door.

"You may have to wait a long time."

"I will wait till she comes and you may tell her that I am here on important business and will not quit this house till it has been transacted."

The maid was heard on the stairway and Rufus went back to the arm-chair of which he took possession and waited on.

An hour passed away and he was still holding the fort with the same persistence and coolness.

Marie came to the door again, but seeing him in the room was about to shut it when he sprung up and faced her.

"Tell your mistress—you know where she is, girl—that I am here, and that the sooner she comes in the sooner she will get rid of me."

"I can't tell her till she comes back."

Rufus went back to his chair once more. Half a minute later a carriage drove up to the door and he pulled the curtains aside and looked out.

Gladys was alighting and the scamp of the game watched her with eager eyes till she vanished in the hall.

"By Jove! the maid was right," he said to himself. "She has been out; but I will get to see her now."

There were words in the hall—words which he barely heard, as if Marie was narrating what had happened to her mistress—and then footsteps came toward the door.

In another instant the figure of Gladys Nilson appeared to her enemy.

The moment she caught sight of Rufus Reck she stopped and changed color.

He had risen and was looking at her, his face a little flushed and his eyes piercing her through and through.

"I am told that you have called on business," said Gladys.

"I am here on business."

"Very well," replied the fair girl, remaining standing. "You may proceed and state that business."

She was formal and cold, and was dis-

playing the same determination with which she had faced Sloper Pinch in her father's office.

"You may not approve of the matter which brings me to your house just now. I am here to offer you my hand—"

Gladys threw up her hand and stopped the rascal.

"If such is the nature of your errand, you may consider it concluded already," she said.

"But you will hear me through. I am not here to be checked thus suddenly, nor did I come hither to half conclude the business which has brought me to your house."

Gladys fell back almost to the door, still looking at the man in the middle of the room.

"I will not hear another word!" she said. "I recognize your face now. You are the man who encountered me near the ferry."

"I am the same man," and a smile arched Rufus Reck's lips. "You would not hear me then; but you shall hear me now."

"I will not."

He advanced a step; he stood almost within reach of Gladys Nilson, and his hand suddenly shot out and covered her.

"Listen to me," he said sternly. "Whether you want to listen or not, I am here to talk. Do you know what I can do with your life, woman? Do you know that you are in my power, and that I can blight your future happiness with a word, or make your life all sunshine?"

"I prefer to have it clouded rather than listen to you."

"Foolish girl!" laughed Rufus Reck. "You are not aware that it is in my hands to cover your name with obloquy and to make you the branded woman of New York by being the child of one whose life I can darken, and whose past I can open up, to the shame of every one in whose veins his blood runs."

"You mean my father?" exclaimed Gladys. "You are now talking about one whom you have doubtless already ruined, if not driven mad, and you shall know that as his child I utterly refuse to have a thing to do with you."

"You will not? Very well. When the blow falls—when I tear from your father's life the veil that hides his past from the world—you will repent in sackcloth and ashes your refusal to listen to me."

"Then proceed and tear aside that veil. Know that you are hated in this house, and that I spurn your offers and bribes."

Gladys reached the door and threw it open.

"Marie?" she called.

There were steps on the stairs and Rufus Reck for an instant held his breath.

"Call the girl in and we shall have a larger audience," said he, coolly. "Summon her and I will tell the story of the past, in the presence of your gossiping maid, will let you see your father as he was."

Gladys looked into the hall and saw Marie coming.

"Yes, here she is," said Rufus Reck.

"Come in in five minutes," Gladys said to the girl. "Go back and come when I have said."

Marie with a look at her mistress withdrew.

Gladys turned again to the man in the room.

"What do you know?" she asked.

"Oh, you want me to tell you, do you?" he grinned. "You want me to open up the past and yet you spurn me. Do you really want your father's life uncovered?"

She hesitated.

"I know it all. I know what he did years ago and what his hands performed within the past few days. I hold his honor in my hands, girl. I can blight or save. It all lies with you. I hold the secret. It is not known beyond my heart. I offer you the sealing up of that secret. If you reject it you cannot compute the heart suffering that will ensue."

"And you will keep what you know if I consent to become your wife?"

"On no other terms."

The lips of Gladys, the broker's child, trembled while she looked at Rufus Reck.

"I have her in my trap," thought the man. "I haven't failed this time. The prey is mine!"

All at once Gladys advanced and stopped within four feet of him. Her figure seemed to increase an inch in stature and her eyes flashed.

"You have failed, sir," she said. "Your mission has resulted in defeat. I entertain no such propositions, not even for a minute."

"Think a moment, girl—"

"I have thought a moment and that decides me. You can go out and do your worst."

"I can make you out the child of one whose hands are stained with human blood."

"Go out and do it. We will see if the world will believe you."

"I will do it! I am able to prove all my charges."

Gladys stepped back and her quivering finger covered the open door.

She did not notice Rufus Reck, and the villain, seeing that he had failed, threw at her a look of hatred and slunk from the room.

CHAPTER XXIX.

BACK IN THE RED ROOM.

RUFUS RECK must have felt when he left the home of the missing broker that at last he had found one woman who could face him with unruffled countenance and defy him to do his worst.

When he emerged from the mansion his face was white and his eyes had the gleam of a wild beast's.

"Wait," he said to himself. "I will show this girl that she has defied the wrong man. In a little while she will change her tune and I can dictate my own terms. Does she expect me to stop where I am, to turn from the golden quest and give up the game? If she does she doesn't know Rufus Reck."

He found Susette waiting for him when he went back to her house.

The moment he entered her presence she looked at him with a peculiar smile and said:

"I have seen her."

"Madame Spider, or Mona?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"She intends to make it hot for you."

"For me?" asked Rufus with a start.

"Yes, for you."

"Did she recognize you? I would have thought you would assume some sort of disguise."

"I did, but she has the same black penetrating eyes as of old."

"No doubt of that."

Susette then proceeded and related her experience with Mona and was listened to by Rufus who pretended to smoke complacently while she talked.

"Wait," said he. "I realize that this woman has suddenly become dangerous."

"Suddenly?" smiled Susette. "Wasn't she always so?"

"Perhaps."

"What are you going to do?"

"Silence her!"

"How?"

"You must have a little patience. You weren't tracked from the house, were you?"

"I saw no one at my heels."

"You looked, of course?"

"I did."

Rufus was silent for a moment.

"I saw our little secret-keeper on the street to-day," he remarked.

"The dressmaker?"

"Yes, the bird I overhauled in the Park. She is looking quite pale."

"You told me that she had changed her quarters."

"She has, as if the memories connected with the other house were not pleasant ones."

"You did not speak to her?"

"Why should I? I have nothing more to do with Miss Collie Cormorant. Besides, I guess she is keeping the secret and that is what seems to trouble her."

"If she should tell the detective?"

"We could do nothing with her, but the girl will not tell him. That oath will seal her lips and then she is somewhat conscientious."

In a little while Rufus Reck was on the street and in another portion of the city.

It was true that he had seen Collie Cormorant that very day.

The dolls' dressmaker was looking pale, for the secret which she was keeping was telling on her and she was almost breaking down under its weight.

Not to be allowed to give the detective a clue which she believed might lead to the discovery of the person who killed Miles Tavish was, to say the least, wearing on her nerves, and she longed for the time when she could tell what she knew.

But when would that time come?

Who would absolve her from the oath and when could she unseal her lips and let the ferret know everything?

Collie Cormorant was on terms with the person who took the room on Grand street which she had vacated.

This was a young lady who worked at a trade similar to her own, and once or twice Miss Cormorant had paid her friend a visit.

It was the evening of the day when she was seen on the street by Rufus Reck that she concluded to pay her friend a short call.

She had been in the neighborhood of Grand street delivering some work and turned her steps in direction of the house already famous in the crimson annals of New York.

Entering the house she bounded up the steps with her old time vivacity, but at the door of the old room she paused with an indistinct feeling of horror.

The door of the red room just across the hall was closed, but the little dressmaker heard a noise in it.

She did not know who occupied it now, nor had she asked who had had the temerity to take a room in which a murder had thrilled the city, but with her hand on the knob of her old room she listened with head half turned at the noises in Miles Tavish's room.

When she did try the door she found it locked. Her friend was out.

Miss Cormorant stood perplexed at the threshold.

All at once she heard the knob of the other door turn and fearful of being seen there she ran down the hall and stopped where the light was dim.

A man came out of the crimson room and paused a moment at the portal.

The little dressmaker was looking at him with a start, for his figure was familiar and the moment he turned toward her she gave utterance to a slight scream.

It was a cry which she found impossible to keep back.

With a quick stride the man came toward her.

She had hugged the wall and could go no further.

He came on, his eyes fixed upon her and his hand thrown out to drag her into the light.

In another second he had halted in front of her and Miss Collie Cormorant, unable to shriek now for very fright, could only look at him and recall where she had seen him before.

The man who had captured her in the Park stood before her once more.

Rufus Reck, though she did not know him by that name, was ready once more to pounce upon her and perhaps drag her off to another prison with the stern-faced woman for a jailer.

His hand closed on the girl's arm and she was pulled into the light with a laugh from the man's lips.

"Playing spy in spite of the oath, eh?" he exclaimed. "Watching me, were you?"

Stammeringly Miss Collie protested that she was not.

"Come, the truth fits better than a falsehood," was the reply. "You can't hope to deceive me long, girl. I am not to be hoodwinked in this manner. Were you playing spy for him?"

"I was playing spy for no one. I only came to see my friend who occupies my old room."

"Ah, a likely tale. But spy or no spy, you have been caught in a bad place for yourself just now. Is your friend at home?"

"She is out."

"Very well. You would wait till she came, I suppose?"

"Such was not my intention. I was on the eve of going home when I heard some one in his room."

"When were you there last?"

"Not since I found him dead on the floor."

"Perhaps you would like to take a peep at the place just now."

"I have no desire to do so."

"But come, you shall see it all the same. You will note a few changes there and these you may remember, since you are oath-bound. You haven't broken your oath, girl?"

"It is as inviolate as when I took it for you and the woman."

Collie was escorted to the room of the crime and Rufus Reck opened the door.

A light laugh from the nearest window across the alley came into the apartment which looked as usual to the dressmaker and she was taken to a chair at the little table.

"I don't more than half believe what you have told me about coming to see your friend," continued the man. "You come here just when I am in the house, and you are found in the hallway when I emerge from this room."

"But it is true!" cried Miss Cormorant. "I give you my word that such is the case. I can do no more."

He seemed to believe her now.

"But, girl," he said, "you know what he is doing."

She gave him a look, but did not reply.

"I say that you know what the ferret, this detective friend of yours, is at."

"If I do, that is also my secret."

"Ha, you defy me, do you?"

"I defy no one. If you have secrets which you do not give away, why should I not have secrets, too?"

"But this man—you know what his plans are. You know what he has picked up about what took place in this room?"

"Do you think Plush Velvet would tell me what he has picked up—I, a dressmaker on small wages and a creature of no importance? Do you believe that a keen detective would make me his confidante, and in a murderer case?"

Rufus Reck seemed to be struck with the girl's way of reasoning.

He looked uneasily toward the door, and seemed to smile to himself.

At the same time the little dressmaker threw a glance from the nearest window and across the alley which separated the two tall houses.

What did she see at the opposite window but a human face?

It was the face of a man, and it seemed to be pressed against the pane as if its possessor was trying to look down into the very room where she was.

At first Miss Cormorant started, but in an instant she thought that perhaps a spy was at work—a spy who did not have Rufus Reck's welfare at heart, and when she turned toward the man, who was about to speak again, she lost sight of the face at the window.

"I will let you off again if you will go home and add this interview to the secret you are already keeping," he said.

Eager to quit that house, the dressmaker was ready to promise almost anything.

She gave the solemn promise, and he led her to the door.

"Now go, and as you value life and light keep the oath you have taken."

As the door opened she looked across the room again, and at the window across the way.

The face was there again, and now it had a familiar look.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BROKEN BUTTON.

RUFUS RECK had not seen the face at the window.

If it had caught his eye, perhaps he would not have devoted to Miss Cormorant as much time as he did, but he led her from the fatal house without knowing that the best detective in Gotham had witnessed the interview.

Plush Velvet, always on the trail, came out of the other house in time to see Rufus reach the sidewalk.

What had become of the little dressmaker the ferret did not know, but that was immaterial at the time.

He followed Rufus back to the same house to which he had once before tracked him and there he remained half an hour.

When he came out, he had the detective again at his heels, and in a short time, he was seen walking the nearest Park as if waiting for some one.

That person did not come. The truth is, he would never come to keep any more appointments with Rufus Reck, for even then he lay dead in the Morgue and was soon to be carried off to fill the grave of one who had betrayed his employer and fallen into evil ways.

"Now for the play I failed at," said Rufus, glancing at his watch. "This time there will be no little red face to baffle me, and I will wait till the man comes in person. Things are getting desperate and Susette is restless."

He walked fast till he turned into the Bowery when he slackened his gait and turned at last into the hallway leading to Plush Velvet's office or lodgings.

He had been there before, but had failed. Duces Teckum had disarranged his plans by coming in instead of the prey he sought, but now he would remain in ambush till the ferret returned.

It might be soon or the night might wear away and he would not get to strike before dawn.

There nestled in Rufus Reck's eye a look of determination.

It was, too, the gleam of the hunted man, the look of one who finds no matter which way he turns the trail of the hunter and the menace of defeat.

An hour passed, but he waited on.

He heard the nearest clock strike the next hour and the next, but the door did not open and he was alone among the shadows of the ferret's den.

Rufus Reck grew a little impatient, but he did not let impatience get the best of him.

To go down and leave the room to peace might be to lose the game.

It might be to give the detective more latitude and to throw him at last squarely before his path where he could give him "some trouble," as Susette had expressed it.

One or two persons came up the staircase, but they did not bend their footsteps toward that particular door.

Midnight would soon come.

There was a light in the hall, and he knew that it threw its gleams up and down the narrow corridor.

Still he waited on.

He wanted to smoke, this cool head did, but he put this desire aside and did not indulge.

At last a step approached the door.

In an instant the dormant nerves of the man in ambush were all tension, and he put one hand upon a revolver while he turned his whole attention to the portal.

In a moment the door would open and Plush Velvet would come in.

Seconds seemed hours to Rufus Reck.

After all some one else might come in; he might not have to face the detective, but another person as perplexing as was Duces Teckum with his red face and queer ways.

The door opened after an interval which seemed eternity.

There was no disappointment this time; the ferret of New York had come home.

Concealed behind the curtain stretched across one corner of the shadow's room Rufus Reck saw Plush Velvet stop near the table.

The detective's time had come.

Rufus fingered the trigger with some nervousness.

But all at once with a movement which could not be anticipated, Plush Velvet crossed the room and seized the curtain, pulling it down upon the floor.

The man in ambush fell against the wall with an exclamation of surprise.

He had not looked for this.

"Come forward. You will admit that the play has failed, Mr. Reck," said the detective.

Rufus did not stir.

At first his hand seemed imbued with mad strength when he looked into the face of his hunter, but he did not lift it, for he was looking into the same revolver which he had seen leveled at him in Marcus Nilson's office.

He had been caught.

Into the net of the indomitable ferret he

had fallen at last and its meshes held him.

"You have been waiting for me," continued Plush Velvet. "Well, I am here."

Still there was no answer beyond the glare of the eyes that would have killed had they been arrows.

"There are two chairs at the table," continued the ferret. "We will take them for a spell."

Forced to let his revolver slide to the floor by the menace of the other weapon, Rufus Reck walked sullenly to the table and took one of the seats.

Plush Velvet took the other one and for half a minute silence fell between the two men.

If Plush Velvet had found the right man he did not betray it by word or look.

If he believed that he was at the end of the trail he did not give Rufus to understand that he thought so.

The White Dandy waited for the ball to open, resolving that he would maintain a silence which would baffle his captor after all.

The detective looked across the table a little while as if collecting his thoughts.

"Did you ever know a man named Maxwell?" he quietly asked.

A smile came to Rufus Reck's mouth.

It was a strange question. It struck Rufus that way.

"You heard me?" Plush Velvet went on. "You once knew a man named Maxwell."

"Where did I know him?"

"In the South. You also know a woman named Susette."

No reply.

Plush Velvet was not to be beaten by a sullen silence, for he leaned back in his chair and appeared to wait a little.

All at once one of his hands threw upon the table a letter with the address uppermost, and Rufus Reck's eyes fell upon it.

It was addressed to Palos Midway.

Then across this letter fell a bit of paper covered with writing, which the man seemed to recognize, for he started.

This was the memoranda found by the detective on the person of the dead clerk in the Morgue.

A defiant look came into the prisoner's eye at this juncture, and his lips seemed to meet, but he said nothing.

He was determined to brave it out.

"You've have a strange career," said Plush Velvet. "You have been in prison in the South; you have had for a companion a man who was drawn into the net of crime by you. That was years ago, and now after all that time you play the game of blackmail against him."

"You also knew in the South—always in the South, you see—a man called Anton Amos. This man had a secret which affected the welfare of the other one. He had it in his power to blast that rich man's life, and he intended to work that secret. Afraid that his wife, Madame Spider, might come into the game and rob him of his secret, he transferred it to paper and carried it to a brace of law sharks on the Bowery.

"He thought that the fact of this deposit was his secret, and his alone. He went back to his little room, confident that he was now doubly armed; but alas! there was another one who wanted the very thing he had left with the lawyers.

"That same night this strange man died—not as Anton Amos, but as Miles Tavish."

Rufus Reck was looking straight into the detective's eyes, and was drinking in every word as it fell from his lips.

He did not stir, but sat bolt upright in his chair, looking across the narrow table upon which lay two links in the chain.

"What the murderer found in that room was but little, but still it was something. He wanted a hold on the man who in time would have been blackmailed by Miles Tavish. What he left in that room when he left it was subsequently discovered by little Miss Cormorant, the dolls' dressmaker across the hall."

"He left the house with the secret all his own, as he thought. He found in that room which he ransacked a clue to the deposit to the papers. He left behind him, however, something which he did not miss at the time."

"In the struggle which he had with Miles Tavish in the old man's chamber, I say he

lost that which gave him no trouble, and which I suppose he has quite forgotten."

In his eagerness—an eagerness which he could not suppress—Rufus Reck leaned forward, and even rested his tapering fingers on the edge of the table.

Guilty or not guilty, he did not breathe.

Plush Velvet ran his hand down into his waistcoat pocket and seemed to touch something there.

"The man who killed Miles Tavish overlooked the small things of importance, but did not desert the larger ones," he went on. "He might have secured his secret in another way, but he did not choose to do so. Then, with Miles Tavish out of his way, what stood between him and the successful playing of the secret against Marcus Nilson and his thousands?"

"Nothing."

Rufus almost mechanically answered the question aloud.

He had worked himself up to a pitch which he found difficult to control. He did not seem to realize that he was sitting before one who had picked up all the threads of the crimson skein.

Would that hidden hand never be lifted from the vest pocket?

All at once it came out and was poised over the table a moment.

Rufus saw something between thumb and finger.

It fell with a slight sound upon the table, rolled an inch and then stopped.

It was but the half of a button, a brown horn button nicely polished, and when it became quiet Plush Velvet said quietly:

"The other half of this button is on the coat you wore, on the night of the twenty-second!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

GATHERING IN ALL THE THREADS.

A BRIEF silence followed the detective's last words; then he resumed:

"After the crime—you went to Miles Tavish's room that night to get the papers which you suspected he had prepared—"

The accused man leaned suddenly forward and exclaimed:

"You needn't detail the act; you need not tell me what happened that night. Do you want to put the bracelets on?" he asked.

"No. You will come with me."

"I might give you the slip. I might break away from you like Palos Midway did."

"I will take the chances. Besides, we are not going very far."

They went out together.

"Here, look at this," said a man who appeared rather suddenly to a woman in a little house some distance from the ferret's den that same day, and he threw into her lap a paper the print of which was still fresh.

The woman held the sheet at arm's length and looked at a headline which contained a name which startled her.

"So he did it, eh?" she cried. "So that man the cool head and Susette's friend committed the crime."

"It says so," answered Custer Katch.

Madame Spider, or Mona Tavish, read the account of the detective's catch and threw the paper from her.

In another instant she was on her feet.

"It is his triumph and my failure unless I go to him."

"To the ferret?"

"No, to Rufus Reck!" was the reply.

"But you won't do that?"

"Why not? Haven't I sworn that I would have the blood of the person who committed the crime of the twenty-second?"

"The law will take that. Justice will choke Rufus Reck and as for me I don't intend to remain here longer and get mixed up in the matter in any way."

The law shark of the Bowery went to the door from whence he looked back at Mona.

It was growing dusk again in Gotham.

Madame Spider looked at the lawyer a moment and then swiftly crossed over to where he stood.

"So you are going to run off, are you?" she cried. "You remember that I stopped you once before, that I brought you to this house and that we entered into a league of mutual aid. You were to assist me in my

work, and in turn I was to share with you when I had played my hand against the broker."

"Yes, but the hand of this merciless spotter has blocked every game."

"But I know enough to attack the goldbug. I know some of my dead husband's secrets, and if you will stand by me we will feather our nests—"

"Not while Plush Velvet lives!" was the interruption. "This man will turn to other fields now. He is already Marcus Nilson's helper, for you know that the broker went to him and engaged him to work up the very case which he has concluded."

Madame Spider did not speak.

"Then you will quit the city and turn up in other fields, eh?" she said at last.

"Just so. I will bury my identity in other parts of the country and reap riches in a city where they don't hunt men down for their connection with the law."

Custer Katch shut the door and left Mona alone, but on the stairway he stopped and looked back.

"I ought not to go off with the enmity of that woman," said he to himself. "I should take with me her friendship, for she is capable of playing against me wherever I go a hand of hate."

He went back and opened the door.

Mona, seated at the table and with her head leaning back in the chair, did not seem to regard him.

"I don't want to go off without bidding you good-by nor wishing you well," he began, when he suddenly stopped as if he had seen the strange pallor which had already settled over Madame Spider's face.

He stepped forward; he bent over the table and took a good look at the face before him.

It was rigid; the hands were clinched, and in one was the neck of a small vial almost covered by the dark fingers.

"Heavens! she's dead," cried Custer Katch.

Then he opened the hand and the vial fell to the floor to be held up and inspected a second.

Custer dashed the bottle down and fell back to the door.

"She changed her mind—perhaps because I was deserting her. She won't make any one trouble now, and what she knows about me is safe and the secret of the dead."

He stole from that room, slipping down the steps outside and then gliding off underneath the lamps until he reached his own little office the door of which he hailed with an ejaculation of joy.

"This won't be home long," he remarked, as he inserted the key and turned it. "I am safe no longer in this city, especially since Duces Teckum knows what he knows. But—"

He was inside now and was standing near the door with his eyes ready to fly from his head and his whole frame in a quiver.

"I've been waiting for you," said a voice, and a man rose at the table and seemed to come forward.

It was the very person whose name he mentioned—it was the redoubtable Teckum himself.

"You?" cried Custer. "I never gave you a key to this office, no matter if I was forced to take you into partnership."

"Of course not, but there are other keys you know," was the grinning reply. "You have heard, I suppose?"

"Of the detective's triumph? I have heard."

"Well, what are you going to do now?"

"How does that victory concern me?"

Over Duces Teckum's face spread a malicious smile.

"Think a moment. You were in the house in Bleeker street one night and he came to see you—the ferret did. Wasn't it a trap which you hadn't the nerve to spring on him? And when he went away and you saw another man on the staircase, a man who you thought was Plush Velvet, you fired—"

Custer Katch sunk into a chair and broke Teckum's sentence.

"What will you give me?" queried the red faced man as he bent forward. "I don't want to see you pull hemp for what really was a case of mistaken identity."

Custer Katch took hope at these words.

"What will you take?"

Duces Teckum's gaze wandered to the safe in the corner.

"All you've got yonder?" he said.

"And if I turn all over to you will you let me go?"

"Yes."

Custer rose and unlocked the iron safe, then, turning to his partner he waved his hand toward the open door.

"It is yours. Everything I possess in the world is from this moment in your hands, Duces Teckum. Good-night."

"Good-night and good luck," was the reply and once more Custer Katch was on the street, this time looking not back at the scene of his failure.

He did not see the little man spring avariciously toward the safe and stoop at the door; he did not see him go through its contents, taking out drawer after drawer and ransacking them.

"Cheated!" cried Duces Teckum falling back with his cheeks aflame and his eyes flashing like a madman's. "The dog was as poor as Lazarus!"

Meantime Custer Katch was hastening away as if he feared that Duces Teckum would repent of his bargain and follow him; he vanished as the shades deepened toward the later hours of that night, and no one saw the figure that crouched in one corner of the ferry-boat cabin and left it the moment the boat touched the other side.

It was the last seen of Custer Katch. In other States perhaps he carries with him while he cheats fresh victims the secret of the crime which dissolved the famous firm of Bowery sharks, for Duces Teckum never followed him but returned to his meager practice, forced to be content with what he had fished from Custer's safe.

When Plush Velvet went to lay hands on the fair conspirator of the game—Susette—he found her waiting for Rufus Reck; but she gave him a defiant look and went along.

"I told him to kill you," said the woman. "I warned him to play out his hand as speedily as possible, else he would never play it out at all. But he hesitated; he waited too long. I would not have waited. I would have killed you in broad daylight!"

When it came out that Rufus Reck was the murderer of Grand street, that he had gone to Miles Tavish's house to rob him of the secret which he was soon to use against Marcus Nilson—intending to use that same secret in the same way himself—there was some surprise and the law did its part when the time came.

Marcus Nilson came back from his retreat in Maxwell's house, and dying soon afterward left the secret of his past unknown to Gladys, who waited till the lover came from Europe when she became a happy bride.

As for little Miss Cormorant, absolved from her oath by the action of the law when it was too late to help Plush Velvet in his man-hunt, she took the fact much to heart; but not long afterward the city was surprised to learn that she had given up the dressmaking business to become the wife of a man well known wherever his name was mentioned—Plush Velvet, the Prince of Spotters, the ferret of the Bowery and Broadway.

THE END.

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